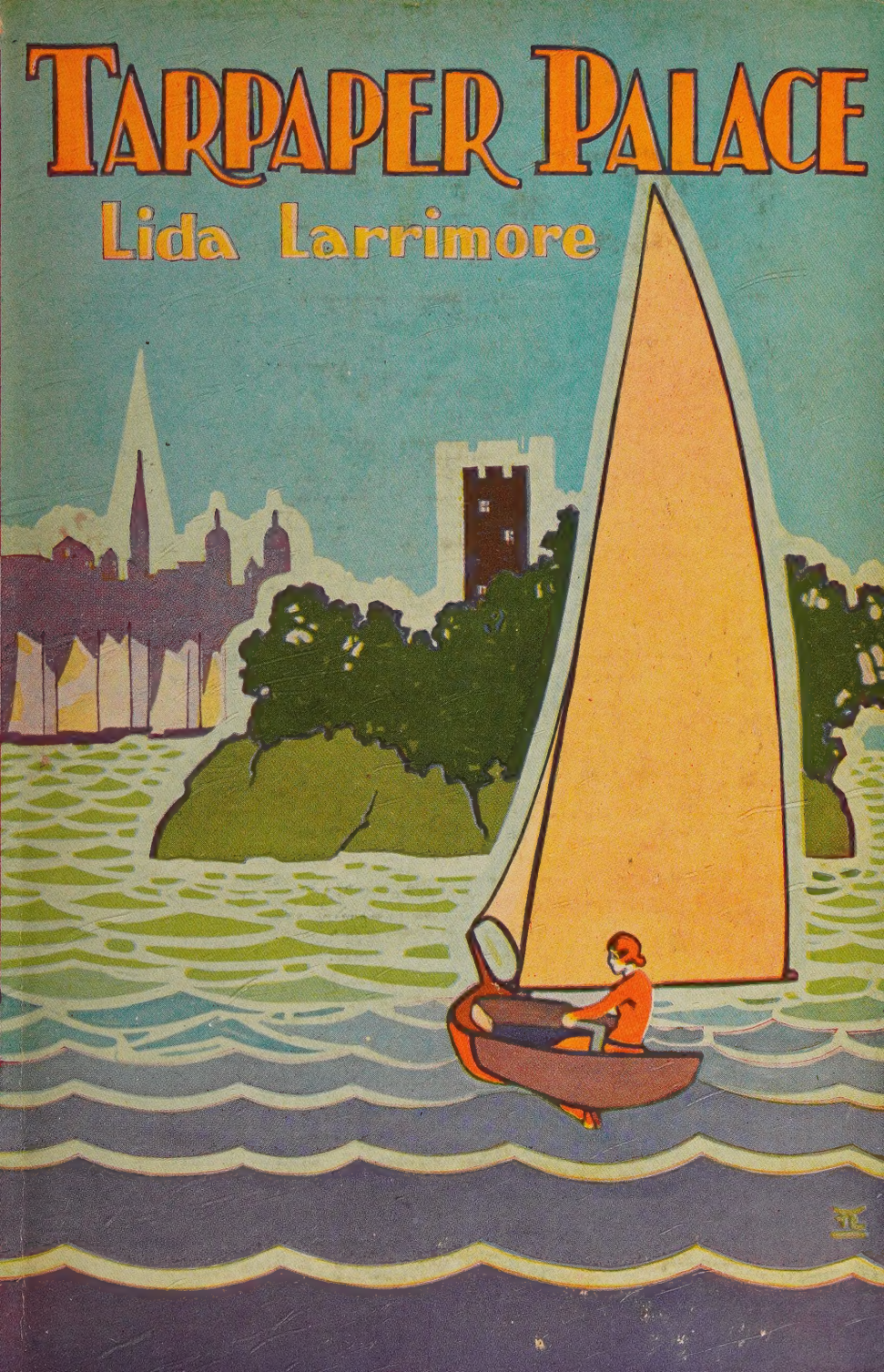
TARPAPER PALACE

Lida Larrimore



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TARPAPER PALACE

By

LIDA LARRIMORE

Here is a romance as delightful and charming as its dainty heroine, and as the garden she longs for — "a garden full of hollyhocks and butterflies and an apple tree or two."

Mary Ellen yearns for what she calls her "Five Impossible Things" — but all she has ever had is a deserted tarpaper palace, a strange, old half-finished building on an island. Then, suddenly, it becomes a place of enchantment for her when Eric Swann, the owner, comes to spend the summer there, bringing, in spite of difficulties and threats of heartbreak and separation, promise of the happiness that Mary Ellen desires and deserves.

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BY LIDA LARRIMORE

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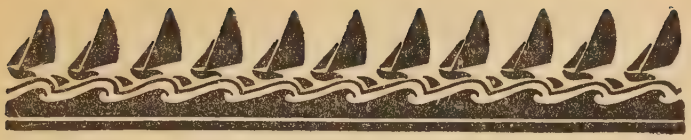
P H I L A D E L P H I A

MANUFACTURED
IN THE U. S. A.

FOR
MY MOTHER
The First Lida Larrimore



I

IT was an humble sort of palace, weed grown and deserted; a palace under a spell. Mary Ellen, turning her boat for another lazy tack across the harbor, looked at it with slowly awaking interest. The palace on Shadow Island was a familiar sight. She sailed past it day after day without glancing at its square tower covered with tarpaper rising from a tangle of pine and scrub oak trees, without giving a thought to the unsolved mystery of its desolation. It was as accustomed and commonplace as the pumpkin-yellow fish sheds, the railways, or the lighthouse at the end of the breakwater.

To-day, however, its lonely detachment harmonized agreeably with the gentle melancholy of her thoughts. She gripped the sheet rope between her knees, rested her chin in the palm of her hand and gazed with thoughtful eyes at the woodbine trailing in fantastic patterns against the tarpaper tower, the frail tinted bells of the wild morning-glories swinging above its crenelated battlements.

Mary Ellen was lonely. It was a new experience, bewildering, incomprehensible. She could not understand the restlessness that possessed her, the constant longing for something vague, utterly intangible that dimmed her pleasure in the sea and the rocks, the gulls flashing across the sky. She had never felt that way before. Summers in Mayport were delightful. She

thrilled in response to the stir of activity that swept through the village with the return of the summer visitors. She liked to watch the big houses on the Cape wake from the long winter sleep, open their shuttered eyes, don festive raiment; awnings, flower boxes, wicker furniture.

She liked the boats gliding in and out of the harbor; slim, darting racers, schooners trimly rigged, luxurious yachts gleaming with paint and polished metal. Lovely names glittered in gilded letters on their prows: *Silver Wings, Swallow, Dawn, Lazy Lady.* She liked the ornamental seamen in white duck and gold buttoned serge, the ladies in trim sport clothes and gay felt hats who sat at tea beneath the afterdeck awnings. They represented to her a life of graceful leisure, glamorous but not quite real. She observed them with interest but no thought of envy as one might watch the unfolding of a play.

It had been pleasant in other years to cuddle in the stern of the *Wanderer* when Grandfather took out sailing parties, to listen to the old man's chuckling remarks, the gay conversation of the visitors. She had liked to lie on the sand at Half Moon Beach, quiet, drowsy, immersed in waves of color; sunlight glinting on rust red rocks, the queer greenish blue of the water dotted with bathing caps, purple, vermilion, daffodil yellow like strange tropical fruit bobbing inshore from a wreck. The striped umbrellas planted in the sand amused her; the children flitting like sandpipers along the edge of the water. She had enjoyed the music drifting at evening through the windows of the hotels, the lighted verandas, the little shops and tea rooms.

There had been so much to see, new impressions, varied interests. Each day had been a delightful adventure.

This year it was different. The pleasures of other summers had lost their charm. Perhaps it was because she was twenty. Mary Ellen sighed. Twenty years old and nothing had happened. Each year was like all the others; snow and cold in the winter, the balky stove in the Cherry Hill schoolhouse, long evenings with Grandfather and the aunts; in the summer life and color, a promise of something tremendous about to happen, a glamorous promise never fulfilled. Life remained always the same.

Strange that she should feel it so intensely. Nicer to be a little girl, content with living, not wishing for things beyond her reach. What things? Mary Ellen had no idea. She knew only that she was no longer content to watch the pageant of summer unrolling beneath her eyes, just as she no longer enjoyed clam bakes and movies and dancing with the village young folks. She seemed not to fit in anywhere. Like the deserted palace she inhabited a lonely island. The active, colorful life of Mayport surging all about somehow failed to touch her. She lived in a world of fancy, perplexed, lonely, discontented.

She wondered if her features had changed with her thoughts, if the disturbing inner restlessness was outwardly visible. The thought never failed to interest her. She took a powder case from her pocket and gazed intently at her reflection in its tiny round mirror. There was no vanity in her silent scrutiny of the girl in the mirror. Mary Ellen knew that she was not pretty. Her face was too thin. Her hazel eyes under

curving dark brows were more often green than gray. Tawny freckles powdered her straight little nose. Her lips were thin, the upper one too short. It curled when she smiled in a fashion which Mary Ellen did not approve.

Her hair was lovely. She liked her hair. It was long, soft and fair, pale gold, parted from her brow to the nape of her neck and twisted in soft coils over her ears. When it hung in gleaming skeins over her shoulders and far below her waist she looked like a dryad, a shy, green-eyed dryad with a firm little pointed chin. But Mary Ellen did not want to look like a dryad. She admired far more the girls on magazine covers. She yearned for blue eyes, pouting lips, a tilted impudent nose.

No, Mary Ellen was not vain. She searched the face of the girl in the mirror for signs of alteration and surprisingly found none. A wistful expression shadowed her eyes. Her skin was faintly tanned. A new freckle dotted her left eyelid. That was all. She closed the vanity case with a sigh and slipped it back in her pocket. She had heard that loneliness gave one an interesting expression. It was disappointing not to find herself wan and pensive, suddenly beautiful. Things like that happened to some girls. But not to her. Nothing happened to her. She sighed again, a long wistful sigh.

The little boat moved leisurely across the harbor, rocking at times in the wash of a passing launch. Mary Ellen was not conscious of the motion. Lost in perplexing fancies she had forgotten sheet rope and sail. . . . Strange that she should be lonely when

there were always people about. Gray Gables, Grandfather's house in the cove, was filled with summer boarders, queer interesting people; the inevitable artists, a retired opera singer, art school students, a ballet master. They talked of delightful far-away places, Brittany, Granada, Algiers, names to Mary Ellen, irregular sections on the maps of the Cherry Hill geography books.

Their stories of adventures in the world beyond the rim of the New England hills colored her existence with tints as frail and fleeting as the sunset reflections on the water. With the first cool winds of autumn they would depart leaving no more permanent impression on Mary Ellen's life than the waves washing in and out left upon the rock ledges of Shadow Island. It was like reading a series of vivid, extravagantly illustrated books which one must close finally and lay away upon the shelf. Mary Ellen longed for an intimate contact with life. It was unsatisfactory always to see things through other people's eyes. She was filled with an overwhelming desire to see things for herself.

If only there was someone to confide in, someone who would understand! Mary Ellen tightened the sheet rope with an absent-minded tug. She could not talk to Grandfather or the aunts. They loved her; they were kind. But the barrier of years lay between them. Grandfather would laugh at her, smooth her hair, invite her down to the dock to inspect his new boat. Aunt Molly, gentle, faded Aunt Molly with her mild blue eyes and crumpled rose-leaf skin would insist upon bathing her head in violet ammonia and reading

bits from the Psalms in a timid, fluttering voice like the echo of an old melodeon.

Aunt Ella would dismiss her fears as nonsense, set her to stringing beans or weeding the flower border. Aunt Ella believed that work was a cure for all the ills of mankind. Secretly they would be hurt and not a little alarmed wondering if, in spite of their care, the restless roving spirit of her scapegrace father lived again in Mary Ellen. No, she could not talk to the family. They never seemed to realize that she was grown up. Well, almost grown up—twenty last month. She was to them still a child, " poor Bessie's little girl."

If she had a sister, an intimate friend! Mary Ellen's thoughts strayed to the companions of her high school days, Barbara, Alice, lovely impudent Lolly. Once they had shared each other's secrets walking with arms entwined along the winding Cape Queen roads. How long ago it seemed! They had drifted apart, the old intimacy destroyed by time and changing conditions. Mary Ellen seldom came into contact with them now. Barbara returned to Mayport for brief visits between college terms and trips abroad. Alice was married. Her small contented universe revolved about her husband and the plump baby with round blue eyes like her own. Lolly, lovelier than ever, worked in an office in town and devoted her leisure time to a host of admirers.

A picture of Lolly as she had seen her last flashed into Mary Ellen's mind. She had gone with Jim Mason to a dance at the Casino. Lolly was there. Lolly in a slim blue frock dancing with Joe Bandarra, the wild Bandarra boy, son of the Portuguese ship

owner. Lolly with her head tilted, bronze curls glinting, red lips parted, smiling up into Joe Bandarra's caressing dark eyes. Lovely Lolly! Not quite a lady, perhaps, but the prettiest girl in town. Lolly lived on no solitary island. Life would never pass her by. Mary Ellen swallowed very hard to banish the lump in her throat.

The bow of the boat grazed the low-hanging bushes on the opposite shore. Mary Ellen came about with a gentle flapping of the sail, headed again across the harbor. The distance between the boat and the island slowly diminished. She could see distinctly the one tower window that stood open to the sun. She smiled, remembering the day she and Barbara had knocked away the packing-case boards. Five years ago! That summer the village carpenters stopped work on the building and returned to less inspiring tasks commenting sagely upon the eccentricities of human nature.

The palace on Shadow Island had then been a source of never-failing amusement to Mary Ellen and her friends. They picked the lock on the door and boldly took possession. No one ever knew they were there, so thick were the vines, so hushed their voices. Through the long summer afternoons they acted their favorite bits of fiction in the deserted building, redolent of new lumber and plaster damp on the laths. Mary Ellen was always the princess because her hair was long and fair and shining. Barbara was the prince, stately Barbara in hip length rubber boots and a crimson cape. Alice and Lolly served as ladies-in-waiting, soldiers, witches or fairies as necessity demanded.

Alice was plump and placid, sadly lacking in imagination. She did what she was told with a bewildered expression in her eyes. Lolly was often frankly bored. She preferred to walk down Main Street and smile at the boys. Only the distinction of associating with Barbara, of being sometimes invited to tea in the big white house on the hill kept Lolly faithful to the clan. She thought "pretending" was silly and always laughed in the wrong places.

To Mary Ellen the world of make-believe had been very real. What a queer little thing she must have been! She remembered the tears that trembled on her lashes when, as the lovely maid of Astolat, she lay in the bottom of Grandfather's old rowboat with a paper lily in her hand. The token she dropped from the tower window to Sir Lancelot mounted on a sawhorse in the blackberry thicket below was a crimson sleeve broidered with pearls rather than a red cotton handkerchief borrowed from Lolly's father.

Lashed by a length of clothes-line to a slender birch tree she had suffered the tortures of Joan of Arc. Her agony had been so real that Aunt Molly had been obliged to read two Psalms before she could go to sleep the night of the tragedy. The tower window had been unbarred so that the Lady of Shalott might watch in her mirror blue—

"The knights come riding, two and two."

Mary Ellen recalled the steep, ladder-like steps inside the tower, the garlands of cobwebs wreathing the walls, the smell of tarpaper warmed by the sun. She

felt again the wind from the sea caressing her hair, saw the feathery tips of the pine trees dark against the sky, the gray-green water of the bay stretching beyond the village and the breakwater to the dim blue horizon line. Life was simple then. There were no disturbing fancies to haunt her dreams, no restless longings nibbling at her heart. She was contented with the kingdom of Make-Believe, with a gown of trailing cheese-cloth, a gold-paper crown.

She smiled at the memory of the crown. It was a magnificent creation cut in five points and sprinkled with crystal beads. When the sun played upon them they sparkled like diamonds. It had graced the brow of the Sleeping Beauty, of the fair-haired Saxon Rowena, of Cinderella and Queen Guinevere. No earthly diadem could have been more cherished. Mary Ellen wondered where it was; if, having lived its day of splendor, the gold-paper crown had been destroyed. She recalled its place of sanctuary, a hat-box under the tower stairs. A sudden desire to find the crown slipped into her mind. A foolish desire, but irresistible. It would be like recapturing a bit of her lost childhood. She shifted the sail, turned the bow of the boat toward the island.

* * * * * * * *

Mary Ellen tied up at the dilapidated boat landing and pushed her way through the underbrush that choked the narrow sloping path. Blackberry brambles, thorny tendrils of wild rose-vines clutched at her skirt. The low-hanging branch of a tree caught in her hair, held her captive for a moment. She cautiously loosened

its clinging grasp and followed the trail of the tangled path.

How still it was on the island! There was no sound save the lapping of the waves against the rocks, the chatter of a bird eyeing her distrustfully from the limb of a ragged old pine tree. The silence oppressed her; the spirit of adventure ebbed away. She regretted her childish impulse. It was futile to attempt to recapture a lost emotion, sad to go back.

From a distance the palace retained some traces of its former enchantment. Near at hand it was woefully forlorn. The shingles on the lower part of the building were mauve tinted, mellowed by sun and storm. Trumpet vines shook their delicate coral tipped blossoms about the sagging doorway, trailed across the roof to conceal with clustering leaves the gaps in the stone chimney. The dolphin knocker on the door was encrusted with rust; a long reddish stain dripped from its prickly tail. Mary Ellen hesitated. She wished she had not returned to spy upon its desolation.

The curious desire to find her crown, to climb the stairs to the tower window urged her to try the knob. It resisted her efforts. She threw her weight against the weather-worn panels but the door held fast. She remembered that formerly they had managed the lock with patience and an ice pick. Mary Ellen had neither. She was about to give up her quest and return to the boat when she noticed that the window was fastened only at one end. It would not be a difficult task to storm the palace. The sill of the window was level with her chin. She would have to find something to

stand on. Her eyes darted searchingly about, discovered a nail keg at the edge of the thicket. She rolled it under the window, deploring its battered condition.

An element of danger colored the adventure. Village tales of dark doings on Shadow Island flocked through her mind. Perhaps it was used by rum runners, by those roving Portuguese sailors who smuggled casks into the harbor. Perhaps they were even then about their unlawful business! Mary Ellen's heart beat with a queer breathless rhythm. The suggestion of danger increased her desire to explore the palace.

She mounted the keg, pushed aside the packing-case boards which formed a rude sort of shutter and thrust her head through the window. It was light in the long rectangular room. She blinked and discovered that the door at the opposite end stood open. That was odd. Rum runners! Her heart quickened its frantic measure. She wanted to run away but her knees were suddenly weak. Swiftly her eyes traveled about the room, sank from the walls to a lower level—looked straight into the eyes of an entirely strange young man!

They were nice eyes, not at all sinister; brown eyes with tiny flecks of gold. They regarded her gravely with no apparent curiosity or surprise. The stranger sat on a tin army trunk, his legs doubled up almost under his chin. Mary Ellen clinging to the window frame stared at him incredulously.

"Coming in?" he said at last. His voice was cool and impersonal. It conveyed the impression that in-

viting young ladies through windows was, for him, a customary proceeding.

"I can't," murmured Mary Ellen feebly. "I—I think I'm slipping!"

Her hands lost their grip on the window frame; her astonished face disappeared from view. The tottery support had given way. One foot crashed through the head of the keg; the other came to rest upon the slippery carpet of pine-needles. She kicked vigorously but the treacherous keg held fast. Impossible to run away, to hide her injured dignity behind the sail of her own small boat. Mary Ellen grew pink with embarrassment.

She heard a fumbling at the door, the protesting creak of a rusty lock. If only she might get away before this strange young man should discover her graceless predicament! She struggled with the keg, trying at the same time to keep her balance on the pine-needles. It was no use. The keg, battered, tumbling to pieces though it was, would not release its trap-like grip.

The door presently swung open and the stranger emerged. How tall he was! The top of Mary Ellen's head barely reached his shoulder. His unsuspected height together with the unsmiling gaze of his brown eyes made her feel more embarrassed than ever, more uncomfortable and shy.

"I—I can't get it off," she ventured and struggled frantically with the keg.

"Here. Lean against the wall," he directed briefly.

Mary Ellen obeyed. The stranger stooping from his great height released the captive foot.

"Thank you," said Mary Ellen.

"You're welcome."

"I—I didn't know there was anyone here." The warm pink flush crept up to the edges of her hair. She fervently wished that she were back home in the Gray Gables kitchen helping Ruby to polish spoons. The adventure was proving a bit too breathless.

"No reason why you should," said the strange young man.

He did not smile. There was no trace of amusement in his voice. Mary Ellen wondered if he were always so cool in trying circumstances. She wished he would laugh or say something, do anything human and appropriate. The steady incurious gaze of his gold-flecked eyes was disconcerting.

"I'm Mary Ellen Gardiner," she said after a long moment of silence.

"All of it—all the time?"

"Two-thirds of it all the time. You see I was named for my two aunts. If I used either name alone, one of them would be hurt."

"Yes, I know. Relatives are that way."

"I was looking for my crown," continued Mary Ellen and instantly regretted the childish remark. She longed to explain that she was twenty years old and quite grown up but the strange young man gave her no opportunity.

"Do you keep it here?" he asked.

"I used to. But that was a very long time ago."

"What sort of a crown?"

"Gold paper with lots of jewels."

"Sounds valuable."

"Queen Guinevere wore it. So did Rowena and the Lily Maid of Astolat."

"Indeed!" said the stranger politely. "Sit down and tell me how you happened to leave anything so precious in this shack."

Mary Ellen accepted the invitation. Interested, curious, a little less shy she settled down on the step, folded her small tanned hands in her lap. The stranger sat beside her and produced a pipe from the pocket of his shabby tweed coat.

Mary Ellen glanced at him from under the shadowy fans of her lashes. How brown he was! He must live always out of doors. Not a fisherman certainly. But an engineer, a builder of roads perhaps. Sunlight slipping through the lacy trumpet vines discovered rusty plumes in his hair. He didn't look happy. Perhaps he was lonely too. A feeling of sympathy banished her shyness.

"We used to play in the palace a long time ago," she said.

"The palace!" His voice was suddenly sharp.

"That's what we called it. On account of the tower. Tarpaper Palace."

He glanced at the weathered shingles, the tangle of leaves and vines, the tarpaper tower studded with discs of rusted tin.

"Not much of a palace," he said gravely. "You couldn't expect a princess to like it."

"A real princess?"

"A golden princess." His eyes wandered away from her, rested upon a spray of wild roses trembling in the gentle wind.

Mary Ellen considered.

"Well," she said at last, "if it were a real princess, one who was used to a marble palace and peacocks and footmen in velvet suits, she might not like it."

"She didn't," he said as though that settled the matter. Then he asked in a lighter tone, "How did you get in when you used to play in my palace a very long time ago?"

"We picked the lock."

"Oh!" He puffed serenely on his pipe. "I thought you might have used a ladder. One of the tower windows is unbarred. How in the world do you suppose that happened?"

"We opened it to play the Lady of Shalott. I was the Lady and Barbara was the Knight. They laid me out in Grandfather's rowboat with a spray of blackberry blossoms in my hand. It was very touching but the boat escaped from the landing and I floated out across the harbor until my barge collided with the ferry-boat and the lovely Lady of Shalott was towed home in disgrace. Aunt Ella was very cross. She made me hem tea towels every afternoon for a week while Aunt Molly read the Psalms. They were supposed to have a restraining influence upon my wild young nature."

"Which?" asked the strange young man.

"Both," answered Mary Ellen.

The shadow of a smile hovered about his lips, strayed into his eyes. Mary Ellen approved. He looked much nicer when he smiled. Encouraged by his interest she chattered on; recalled for him all the amusing misadventures connected with the invasion of

Shadow Island. She told him about Grandfather who sat all day at the end of the dock watching the sunlight on the water, living over in memory the strenuous days when his ship the *Sally Anne* sailed into the harbor loaded with coffee and spices and silk. She described the Portuguese colony, the queer, brightly painted little houses with stiff lace curtains and plaster saints in the windows, the pink stucco residence of the senior Bandarra, lord of the dark-skinned fishermen. Lolly drifted into her narrative, Lolly with her tossing bronze curls, her impudent charm; Barbara, and Alice who had no imagination.

In brief intervals of silence when Mary Ellen paused for breath and her companion puffed out great clouds of smoke she wondered why she should be talking so intimately to a stranger. Perhaps it was because he looked unhappy, because the fleeting smile strayed so reluctantly into his eyes. Perhaps it was because he did not interrupt. Most people did; Grandfather, Jim Mason, Ruby. The strange young man was a perfect audience. Mary Ellen continued to chatter until the sun, sinking below the tops of the trees, warned her to look at her watch.

"Five o'clock! I must go. There's Madame Cavella's bran-toast."

"What about it?"

"I must make it before supper."

"Who is Madame Cavella?"

"One of the boarders. She's a darling and she used to sing in Grand Opera. She has three chins and is supposed to be on a diet. The poor dear eats bran-toast and spinach for supper but she munches bonbons

all evening when she thinks no one is watching. It's very trying."

He looked sympathetic.

"Do you have many trials like that?"

"The house is full and most of them are a trial. But so far we haven't been threatened with a suicide. Still it's early in the season. There's plenty of time."

"Have you ever been threatened that way?"

"Yes indeed. Last year there was a queer person who stayed all summer. He wrote plays, frightful plays. All the characters died or went insane. He was in love with a faithless dancer and constantly threatened to do away with himself. I used to lock up the carving knives every night. There's always something. This year it's bran-toast."

"Do you make toast all day?"

He seemed inclined to prolong the visit. Mary Ellen disregarded the wrist watch, settled back on the steps and cradled her knees in her arms.

"Oh, no. I wait on the tables and wipe dishes and answer questions."

"You do that rather well."

"What?"

"Answer questions."

"Sometimes I rather enjoy it." She smiled demurely.

"How do you amuse yourself?—if another question won't threaten your patience."

"I sail and swim, and dream on the rocks."

"What do you dream about?"

"There are some questions I don't answer. That's one of them."

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "Perhaps this one is easier. If I am to live on an island, where can I hire a boat?"

"Are you going to stay?" Mary Ellen's heart quite ridiculously skipped a beat.

"If the rain doesn't wash me out. The roof's in bad shape."

"Alone?"

"Entirely alone."

"But won't you be lonely?"

"Perhaps. But I'm quite accustomed to it."

"Accustomed to ——" she hesitated.

"Being lonely." He finished the thought for her.

"It isn't nice," said Mary Ellen gravely.

"To be lonely?"

She nodded her head.

"How do you know? Are you lonely too?"

"Sometimes. It's a queer sort of loneliness ——" Mary Ellen paused. She realized all at once that her companion on the step was a stranger. "You want a boat?" she asked presently.

"Some sort. So I can get over to town. A sailboat with a motor, I think."

"Grandfather will let you have one. Captain Hollis. You'll find him any time down at the dock."

"Captain Hollis," he repeated. "Is he the one who wears on his watch chain the stone that slew Goliath?"

"Yes," answered Mary Ellen surprised and curious. "How did you know?"

"I've heard of him."

"Everyone knows Grandfather. He hates artists and fancy sailors, the kind that wear brass buttons but

don't know 'starboard' from 'port.' They patronize him. Otherwise he's a dear."

"He is evidently a person of discrimination. We shall get along well."

"You hate artists?"

"Yes—and gold buttons."

"What else?"

"Limousines and poodles and pearls. The list is endless."

"You're a queer person," said Mary Ellen.

"I always admit it," he answered calmly. "It's an advantage. You can do just as you like and no one interferes."

He smiled at her then but Mary Ellen rose.

"I must go. Aunt Ella will be worried. But——" she hesitated, a worried pucker smocking her brow. "If you're going to stay, shouldn't you have some furniture?"

"I've blankets and I suppose the floor is no harder than most."

"But——"

"But what?" He walked beside her down the path, paused to push back a bramble that threatened her eyes.

"I've always thought it would be fun to keep house in the palace—if there were chairs and things."

"It might be more comfortable. Will you help me?"

"Perhaps."

"I would appreciate a little advice on the subject," he said gravely.

They reached the narrow landing where the *Cockle Shell* swayed gently, rocked by the rising tide.

"Do you know all about cooking and things?" asked Mary Ellen anxiously.

"Very little. I'll probably have all sorts of difficulties."

"You could let me know," she suggested.

"How? There's no telephone and if I shout the wrong sort of person might come, a girl with plucked eyebrows or a dowager in pearls. Too dangerous."

Mary Ellen unknotted the square of orange silk tied under her collar.

"If you really need help, you can fly this from the birch tree. Our house is almost directly opposite. I'd be sure to see."

"Thank you. That's a good idea."

He took the orange tie from her hand and smiled very nicely.

"But not unless there's a difficulty," warned Mary Ellen.

"What would you consider a good reliable difficulty?"

"If you were starving—or very lonely."

"Nothing less?"

"No," said Mary Ellen, "nothing less."

"I'll remember. Will you come?"

"Perhaps."

She stepped into the boat. The strange young man untied the rope and set the tiny craft adrift.

"I'll clear out the path," he promised, "and open the door. Will you come?"

"Perhaps."

"Not that it means anything to the world at large," he called across a widening expanse of water. "But

just in case you're interested and would like to know, my name is Eric Swann."

"Thank you," called Mary Ellen. "It may be useful." And she steered her boat into the wind.

Half-way across the harbor a belated thought forced its way through the fragments of fancy whirling about in her head. She laughed aloud to the vast astonishment of a man in a rowboat crossing the *Cockle Shell's* bow. It suddenly occurred to her that she had entirely forgotten the gold-paper crown!

II

SUPPER was over. The last dish was wiped, the towels hung neatly on a rack behind the stove. The kitchen was orderly and quiet. Ruby, who "helped out" during the summer, had gone to the movies with her gentleman friend. Aunt Ella was making dough for the breakfast rolls. She hummed a cheerful accompaniment to the steady whirr of the mixing machine. Mary Ellen washed her hands under the faucet, rubbed a slice of lemon over her fingers.

"You're just like your mother, Mary Ellen," observed Aunt Ella. "She never could bear the smell of dishwater."

"I can't either," Mary Ellen confessed drying her hands on a roller towel behind the door. "If you don't rub it off with lemon juice it's there to remind you of to-morrow's dishes and the next day's and the next."

"You do have the queerest notions." Aunt Ella shook her head. "Jim Mason dropped in this afternoon," she added after a pause.

"Did he?" Mary Ellen smoothed her hair before the kitchen mirror. "What did he want?"

"They're goin' to have a sailing party. Hired the *Speed Away* from Father. Jim wants you to go along with him."

"I don't think I will," said Mary Ellen slowly.

"Why not? Jim's a good boy."

"Yes, I know he is. Just the same I don't think I'll go."

Aunt Ella stopped turning the mixer and rested her hands on her hips.

"There's no understanding you anyhow, Mary Ellen. I should think you'd be glad to get off with the young folks once in a while instead of moping around here. It's not natural."

"I don't like that crowd, Aunt Ella, and I don't think they like me."

"Jim does."

"I'm a habit with Jim. He'll get over it," said Mary Ellen lightly.

Aunt Ella glanced at her sharply. The child was a queer piece. It wasn't right nor natural that she shouldn't want to go with the young folks. When Aunt Ella was a girl, a sailing party had been an event to be anticipated for days, hugely enjoyed, remembered with pleasure. She determined to get at the truth of the matter.

"Why don't you want to go, Mary Ellen?"

"They're so noisy," she answered. "And stupid. They do the same things every time, laugh at the same old jokes. I don't know how to talk to them."

She smiled, remembering the ease with which she had chattered to the strange young man on the island. She couldn't talk that way to Jim Mason's crowd. They were not interested in fancies. They lived in a world of motion; healthy young animals, pushing and shoving each other, shouting, giggling, cuddling together in the bottom of the boat. She was embarrassed with them, tongue-tied, ill at ease.

Mary Ellen was fastidious. She hated Jim's clumsy caresses, his shoulder touching hers, the moist palms

of his hands. Useless to explain to Aunt Ella. She wouldn't understand. She liked young people who laughed heartily and made a great deal of noise. Dear Aunt Ella, capable, warm hearted, kind. There had been no time in her busy life for dreams of a more gracious existence. She took things as they came, death, misfortune and happiness alike. The loss of her husband and of the boy who died in France, grieved but did not crush her. To Aunt Ella they were episodes merely and not the whole of life. She did her duty cheerfully and with no thought of reward. She mothered Mary Ellen, the boarders and the village. Everyone loved her. Dear Aunt Ella! Mary Ellen slipped a caressing arm around her waist.

"Don't worry about me, darling."

"But I want you to be happy."

"I am happy here with you and Grandfather. I just don't like sailing parties, that's all."

"Well, everyone to their own tastes. Live and let live, that's what I say. But it don't seem right."

Mary Ellen dropped a kiss on Aunt Ella's rosy cheek, gave her a reassuring squeeze and wandered out on the veranda that faced the bay. In a corner behind a screen of vines Grandfather was talking to Mr. Barton, the thin little man who wrote detective stories. There was no one else in sight. She settled down on the top step, rested her head against a veranda post and looked dreamily out across the bay, smooth in the hush of twilight, reflecting the amber and rose of the fading sunset. Already the huddle of roofs and spires on the opposite shore were smudged with shadows. A boat drifted into the harbor. It seemed to have only two

dimensions, a figure cut from cardboard, black against the golden light. The tide was high. Indolent waves washed against the wall at the end of the lawn. A bird in the elm tree twittered a sleepy song.

Mary Ellen was filled with lazy sweet content. Her eyes sought the dim outline of Shadow Island. There was no light save the gleam of an early star caught in the vines on top of the tower. She reviewed the events of the afternoon, her encounter with the strange young man. Eric Swann. A curious name. Eric. . . . How tall he was! How lean and brown! . . . He looked like the bronze soldier in the post-office square, as coldly chiseled and emotionless except when the fleeting smile warmed his gold-flecked eyes.

She wondered who he was, why he should choose to live alone in the deserted palace. . . . Queer how she had chattered to him! She had never talked like that to anyone before. He must have been frightfully bored. Talk about the family, the village, herself. . . . Mary Ellen smiled. He hadn't seemed to be bored. He asked her to come again. Suppose he should fly her orange signal from the birch tree at the edge of the island. Would she go? . . . Perhaps. . . . Pleasant to talk that way; to tell all the odd fancies flitting through her head. Perhaps he would talk to her some day, tell her the story of Tarpaper Palace. . . .

She didn't feel restless to-night. She was content to sit on the veranda, to watch the gleam of the star above the tower. . . . Eric. . . . She hoped the floor would not be very hard. . . . His hands were nice. So were his teeth. Too bad he didn't smile more

often. If she amused him, he might. . . . He looked as though he needed someone to take care of him. Two buttons missing from the shabby tweed coat. . . . Eric. . . . The wind, salt with the tang of the sea, fanned her cheeks. Across the harbor drifted the sad sweet sound of bells. Mary Ellen sighed, a long happy sigh.

Grandfather's voice roused her from a maze of waking dreams; Grandfather spinning yarns for the detective story man. She listened idly, immersed in the drowsy quiet of evening.

"Yessir," said Grandfather, "human nature's a queer article, take it by and large. There's this business of short skirts. I reckon you wasn't aware that I started all that thirty odd years ago. Yessir, thirty odd years ago." The old man paused dramatically.

"So you're responsible," encouraged Mr. Barton.

"Yessir, I take the credit for it, if credit it is," continued Grandfather. "When the ladies used to come down to the dock switchin' them long skirts and gettin' 'em all tangled up with the riggin', I used to ask them why the nation they bothered with such fol-de-rol. 'Slice 'em off,' says I, 'so's you'd have some chance of makin' shore if the boat tipped over.' They was scandalized in them days, the delicate creatures. I ain't forgot how one of 'em called me an indecent old pagan though I hadn't then no idea what it meant. Well, you see, they've just got around to my way of thinkin'. Sliced 'em off clear up to their knees. Done a good job while they was at it, though I ain't sayin' that considerin' the defects the Lord meant skirts to hide, some of 'em ain't gone a mite too far."

Mr. Barton laughed and Mary Ellen smiled with him though the story was an old one and one which Aunt Ella had long struggled to suppress. Her efforts were in vain. Grandfather liked to shock people. A real character, the summer visitors called him. Well, he was. Mary Ellen glanced fondly at the old man, still hale and hearty after eighty years of sun and sea and storm.

"That's an odd charm you wear on your watch chain, Capt'n Hollis," said Mr. Barton after a brief pause.

The Capt'n chuckled. His stubby calloused fingers touched the stone hanging from a heavy chain. "That has a history, that has," he said, chuckling again. Grandfather had a curious habit of laughing inside. When an amusing thought occurred to the old man, laughter began somewhere in the region of his expansive waist line, traveled upward in a series of gentle vibrations until the ends of his mustache quivered like fern fronds in the summer wind.

"I'd like to hear the story," said Mr. Barton.

"Well." The old man paused to light his pipe. Grandfather did not consider a story worth the telling unless it was well seasoned with tobacco smoke. Mary Ellen watched him search through his pockets for a match, strike it laboriously on the arm of the chair. His fingers fumbled so, poor dear. She usually did it for him. The sudden flare of light disclosed his ruddy bronzed features, his eyes surprisingly blue under the frosty ledge of his brows. They twinkled now with pleasurable anticipation. Grandfather was about to spin his favorite yarn.

"Human nature again," he said puffing out a cloud of smoke. "Some curious specimens of it drift into Mayport now and then. That professor fellow was as queer a one as ever I see. Always talkin' about his ancestors. He'd traced 'em clear back to the Garden of Eden. Got kind of riled up one day when I asked him if he hadn't discovered a special breed of monkeys with extra long tails. Seemed as though nothin' belongin' to his family could be ordinary. I reckon they've got a private corner in Heaven. The professor was chock full of religion. Could say offhand more Bible verses than the Baptist minister. Well, I listened to his talk about ancestors 'til I was plum wore out. Blamed if he didn't claim kin to half the kings and queens in Europe to say nothin' of Daniel Boone and Brigham Young. Says I to myself, 'I'll fix you, young feller.' I got this stone and smeared some red paint on it. I reckon it's too dark for you to see it now. Then I had the stone fastened on my watch chain. Next time the professor come wanderin' down to the dock all swelled up with pride about his ancestors I was layin' for him.

"'Professor,' says I, 'your talkin' about ancestors got me all stirred up to find out somethin' about mine. I been doin' a little investigatin'.'

"'You don't say,' says he, or words to that effect. 'What did you find out?'

"'Well,' says I sort of offhand, 'I ain't got back no further'n King David. This here's the stone he fired at Goliath. It's been in the family quite a spell. See, there's some of the giant's blood on it yet.'

"That was the last time ever the professor favored

me with a visit," finished Capt'n Hollis. "Blamed if he warn't so mad he left town next day."

"I don't wonder," laughed Mr. Barton. "It was an outrageous thing to do."

"Warn't it?" agreed the old man well pleased with himself. "Yessir, folks is queer animals," he resumed after a pause. "You take Jabe Owen and his wife. Livin' together under the same roof and ain't spoke for years. Jabe's a lobsterman, lobsters for the hotels around here. You ever chanced to see his house on the point?"

"The one painted two colors?" asked Mr. Barton. "Yellow on one half and gray on the other?"

"That's the one and ain't it a sight to frighten the gulls? Looks some like a crazy quilt and some like one of these newfangled artist pictures. Time was when they didn't try to improve on nature, but the kind of daubs they paint nowadays, I'm durned if you can tell a cow from a hollyhock. Call 'em pictures, too, and sell 'em, I've heard, for fancy prices. Well, that's not surprisin'. The fool supply don't seem to run out. There's one born every minute."

"I'll confess I don't know much about art," said Mr. Barton.

"You ain't missed anything at all. There was a feller here last summer worked in a boathouse down near the dock on a stretch of canvas big enough for a sail. Had to climb up on a ladder to reach the sky part, if sky it was. When he got it finished, he called me in to see it. Durned if it didn't look like an explosion in a dye factory. Asked me how I liked it.

"'What is it?' says I, squintin' at it careful.

"'The fishin' fleet returnin' at sunset,' says he seemin' surprised I hadn't caught on right off.

"'The fleet!' says I. 'Well, if them things is boats then I'm a kangaroo and you'd best get it under cover before some honest, God-fearin' boat builder has you arrested for slander.'" He laughed with deep enjoyment. "But what was it I started to tell you? Seems as though I've got off the course somewhere."

"The house on the point," Mr. Barton steered the old man back into the channel, "and the lobsterman who doesn't speak to his wife."

"So 'twas," agreed Grandfather, and struck another match. Absorbed in the conversation he had neglected his pipe.

The story of the house on the point again! Mary Ellen dreaming against the veranda post sighed. It was not an impatient sigh but rather a sigh of pity. She thought it must be sad to be old and through with things, to have no other interest in life than telling the same old stories, chuckling at the same point in the narrative, pausing to enjoy its effect on the listener, adding here and there a sly bit of elaboration. She wondered whether she would tell stories when she was a nice old lady in a knitted shawl. Perhaps. Most of them did. She would tell about finding the strange young man on the island and chuckle and try to remember whether his eyes had been brown or blue. The thought made her a little sad and quite determined to crowd as many experiences as possible into her life so there would be material for stories in her placid old age. . . .

Grandfather finished his story. Mr. Barton laughed

heartily and lighted a cigar. Its red tip moved like a restless firefly through the shadows. Silence fell upon them broken only by the creak of the rockers, the wind in the trees, insect sounds in the grass. Mary Ellen watched the moon rise out of the sea, unroll across the water a ribbon of gold. Her throat ached with the beauty of it; foolish tears trembled on her lashes. They turned the stars into tiny blurred crosses and the cross that burned on the tower of Tarpaper Palace was brighter than all the others.

"That's a curious building over there on the island," said the detective story man presently.

"Ain't it?" agreed Captain Hollis. "Queer contraption. It ain't a house and it ain't a shack. Durned if I know what you would call it. Nobody there so fur as I know. Some say it's used by rum runners, but they ain't ever been caught."

"Who built it?"

Mary Ellen, dreaming no longer, listened intently for the answer.

"Lem Pringle and his boys. Lem's a sort of contractor."

"But who owns it?"

"Nellie Shannon," said the old man. "Leastwise, that's what we've always supposed. I reckon you've heard of her."

"The name is familiar. It seems to be connected with college," mused Mr. Barton. "An actress, wasn't she? Favorite about thirty years ago. A sparkling little creature with red hair. Played a couple of times in our college town. The boys all fell in love with her."

"That's Nellie. She used to come here then. Many's the time she's sat right here in this corner listenin' to my yarns. And spunky—My stars! There wasn't a day so stormy but what she'd coax me to take her sailin'. The way she could twist you around one of them slim little fingers! She had everybody around the place waitin' on her hand and foot and proud to do it."

"What was the song she used to sing?" asked the detective story man. "Something about the man in the moon, wasn't it?"

Grandfather's voice was gentle as he quoted the familiar words:

"My sweetheart's the man in the moon,
I'm going to marry him soon.
And behind some dark cloud
Where no other's allowed
I'll make love to the man in the moon."

"That's it!" exclaimed Mr. Barton. "Everybody sang it from one end of the country to the other. She had a remarkable voice."

"Yes," agreed Capt'n Hollis. "Durned if she couldn't make you laugh one minute and cry the next. Half the time you was doin' both without any notion why. Do you recollect her hair? It was that heavy I used to wonder how such a mite of a thing could carry it around. Red gold and way down past her waist. Seemed as though you could warm your hands over it. Brown eyes as big as saucers full of little gold specks. She was a beauty, I'll tell you."

Mary Ellen recalled the rusty plumes in the

stranger's hair, the flecks of gold in his eyes. Nellie Shannon. . . . But his name was Swann. . . . Eric Swann. . . . She waited impatiently for Grandfather to continue his story.

"Nellie came every summer for a spell. Then, all of a sudden she stopped. We heard she got married and then for a couple of years we didn't hear anything. After that the papers was full of her again but she never came back to Mayport. Last year she was here she bought that island from the town. Said she aimed to build a shack on it but nothin' come of it 'til about five years ago when Lem Pringle got word from a lawyer firm in New York to build that thing. There was plans made out and directions just what they should do. Lem begun work on it soon as the snow left that spring. Long about the middle of August word come to quit and quit they did. 'Twas a seven days' wonder in Mayport but folks is used to the sight of it now."

"You don't know why the building was never finished?"

"Nobody around here knows that. Just some more human nature, I reckon likely."

The conversation veered to other topics; ships, winter storms, the new fish packing factory. Mary Ellen slipped back into her dreams. Aunt Molly came out on the veranda with a shawl for Grandfather's knees.

"Now Molly! I don't need to be coddled."

"The night air's chilly, Father. You'll have another spell of rheumatism."

She folded the shawl around the old man's knees and settled into a low rocker beside his chair. Two pairs of eyes followed the path of the moon on the water; Mary

Ellen's bright with hopes for the future; Aunt Molly's dim with memories of the past. A boat churned by close in shore. Wisps of music drifted across the lawn. . . . "You're the idol of my heart, Sweet Adeline." . . . Mary Ellen sighed. Aunt Molly's frail white hands fluttered against her heart.

Mrs. Foster, the energetic visitor from Pittsburgh, followed by her long-suffering husband, returned presently from a walk. They dropped into neighboring chairs, she with the satisfied sigh of one who has done her duty, he with a groan of utter weariness. Mrs. Foster did not waste a moment of the two weeks' vacation. She toured the cape, inspected the fish factory, the art galleries, the Portuguese dock. She clambered about the rocks in search of periwinkles, collected shells and starfish, rose at four o'clock in the morning to go fishing. Her husband, a huge bottle-shaped man, endured patiently to the end. He wrote his own epitaph when he remarked to Grandfather on the evening after Mrs. Foster, dauntless in gray crash knickers, had led the way up circling iron steps to the top of the lighthouse, "I tell you, Capt'n Hollis, I'm the gamest guy on earth."

Aunt Ella, her tasks finished at last, joined the company on the veranda, discussed with Mrs. Foster plans for a picnic on the rocks. Mr. Foster listened and groaned, secretly removed a blistering shoe.

Miss Lillie Belle Lukens, the Dresden china lady who affected picture hats and flowered smocks fluttered around the corner of the house with Mr. Jackson, a widower who was "looking around." Miss Lillie Belle had come all the way from Kansas City to paint

ships. She confessed to a passion for the sea. Every morning she started off for the dock burdened with camp stool and easel, brushes and tubes of paint. Every morning in half an hour she returned, set up the easel in her bedroom and, oblivious to the lure of the sea, painted flowers in pottery bowls. Her bobbed gray hair was permanently waved, her cheeks brightly tinted. Her manner was arch and brightly vivacious. She sat now between Mr. Jackson and Mr. Foster flinging gay remarks to each, one foot in a satin slipper artfully swinging. It is possible she hoped the gentlemen would notice how small it was.

The veranda hummed with voices: Aunt Ella's, hearty and brisk; Mr. Jackson's a bit nasal, ponderously grave; Mrs. Foster's insistent and shrill; Miss Lillie Belle's flute-like and coy. Fragments of conversation triumphed briefly over other fragments.

"Well, I told Elmer we ought to make the most of a trip like this ——"

"Artists! Hump! They're worse'n a swarm of locusts. Last year ——"

"The elephant rock. It's the most natural thing, Mr. Foster. You really must ——"

"It won't be a mite of trouble. Ruby can make some sandwiches ——"

"A vacation sure is strenuous—especially when you try to keep up with Mamma. Guess I'll have to take off another week to rest up when ——"

"Oh, Mr. Jackson! A shooting star! Look! That means somebody ——"

"There's a dandy place out on the rocks. Elmer and I found it Tuesday. No, I guess it was Wednes-

day. Tuesday we went to Rockville. Still it couldn't have been Wednesday because ——"

"I wouldn't dare show my things to you, Mr. Jackson. Your work is so interesting. Still the bowl of pansies isn't bad. If you'll promise not to criticise ——"

"Was it Wednesday, Elmer? Elmer Foster! Have you gone to sleep? I never saw such a ——"

"—and when the waves calmed down durned if there wasn't eight men hangin' on to me same as if ——"

"Oh-h-h-h-h! It's a moth! Take it off quick! They just scare me to death!"

A little flurry ensued. Mr. Jackson gallantly rescued Miss Lillie Belle from the monster. Aunt Molly suggested a dose of aromatics to quiet her nerves. Miss Lillie Belle called herself a goose and thanked Mr. Jackson very prettily. Poor Miss Lillie Belle, thought Mary Ellen, always showing off when there were gentlemen around. Sad to grow old with no one to love you. People were not always amusing. Sometimes they were pathetic. Life was queer. She glanced up at the stars, remote and brilliant. What did they care if Mr. Foster's feet hurt, if Aunt Ella worked from dawn to dusk, if Miss Lillie Belle cried at night because she was lonely? The pattern of the stars would not be altered if the sea should swallow them all. The thought made her shiver. She felt very small and forlorn.

Grandfather's voice shattered the gray web of fancy.

"Well, I'll be dummed!" exclaimed the old man.

"What is it, Father?"

"There's a light on the island! "

"Well, for the land sake! So there is."

Mary Ellen glanced with the others at the dim outline of Shadow Island. Sure enough there was a light, a slender javelin of lamplight piercing the darkness.

"Well, I'll be dummed! "

"Rum runners! " gasped Miss Lillie Belle and laid a small trembling hand on Mr. Jackson's arm.

"A tramp, like as not," declared Aunt Ella.

"I'm going to see that place to-morrow," announced Mrs. Foster, "if the Lord spares me. We'll borrow the Capt'n's rowboat. Can you row that far, Elmer? It's not more than quarter of a mile. Elmer! "

But Mr. Foster's only reply to Mamma's latest enthusiasm was a muffled snore.

And Mary Ellen, who might so easily have explained, said nothing at all.

III

"DID you get the raisin loaf, Mary Ellen?"

"Yes, Aunt Ella."

"And the cake?"

"Yes, darling."

"And the pot of beans?"

"They're all in here." Mary Ellen indicated the basket swinging from her arm.

"I reckon some home-cooked food will taste good to him. Men haven't a mite of sense about eating."

"You'll spoil him, Aunt Ella," teased Mary Ellen. "Men should not be spoiled."

"A little of it won't hurt him, I guess. He's as thin as a clothes prop and there's a look in his eyes like a lonesome child."

Mary Ellen knew the look. It made her want to put her arms around him and tell him not to mind whatever it was that troubled him. She never had. But sometimes the wanting to brought a lump into her throat. Then she folded her arms securely behind her back and chattered nonsense until a smile banished the troublesome look.

"He doesn't look happy," she agreed soberly.

"You find out if he needs anything," counseled Aunt Ella.

"I will." Mary Ellen crossed the lawn to the boat landing. Her feet almost skipped. She was happy because she was taking a pot of beans and a raisin loaf to the strange young man on the island. Only he was no longer a strange young man. Every expression of

his face, every tone in his voice was now entirely familiar. . . . Eric. . . .

"Mary Ellen!"

Aunt Molly was calling from the doorway. Mary Ellen paused.

"Is there room in your basket for these?"

She returned to the veranda.

"Here's a glass of jelly," said Aunt Molly, a flush of pleasure in her cheeks. "And a bottle of cherry wine."

"Aunt Molly! Wine!"

"It's nice in case of sickness," said Aunt Molly timidly. "Like as not he'll get a cramp from swimming. Folks do that aren't accustomed to this cold water."

"How about a hot water bottle?" laughed Mary Ellen. "And knitted bed socks?"

"It don't seem right his livin' over there all alone," worried Aunt Ella.

"And he's a real pleasant young man," added Aunt Molly. "I don't know as I've ever seen nicer manners."

"You're a pair of geese," teased Mary Ellen. "Dear kind geese and you ought to start an orphanage for polite young men with lonesome eyes."

She closed the lid of the basket upon Aunt Molly's contributions and started again toward the landing. Miss Lillie Belle Lukens leaned from an upstairs window, her hair blown into a girlish fluff.

"Off she goes a-sailing
To meet her own true love,"

she chanted and coyly waved a paint brush.

Silly Miss Lillie Belle! Excited because someone was bound on a romantic errand. Sad Miss Lillie Belle with no romantic errands of her own. Mary Ellen was too happy to feel resentful. She blew a kiss to the artistic lady from Kansas City, untied her boat, turned its bow toward the island. Sun jewels sparkled on the bay. The sky was crystal clear, as blue as a robin's egg. White sails flashed against the green of the opposite shore. The *Cockle Shell* moved swiftly, urged on by a jaunty breeze. Mary Ellen wriggled happily, hummed a gay little song.

A week had passed since, revisiting the island in search of her crown, she had found instead a strange young man. Every afternoon her orange flag had fluttered a distress signal from the birch at the island's edge. Every afternoon Mary Ellen had answered it, sailing all the way around the island and back again to the landing so that curious eyes watching from the Gray Gables veranda might not see. The first afternoon he had pleaded ignorance concerning the use of an oil stove. Mary Ellen considered gravely and pronounced it a satisfactory excuse for the orange flag. Then it was the difficulty of selecting furniture. She thought that also might be distressing to a person of no experience. After that he made no excuse at all and Mary Ellen, strangely enough, did not notice the omission.

He rented a boat from Grandfather, a sailboat equipped with a motor in case food and breeze should be lacking at the same time. During the transaction Capt'n Hollis discovered that he was Nellie Shannon's son. The name was a passport to the old man's esteem.

He invited Eric to call at Gray Gables. Eric had come, two evenings ago, the night of the fourth of July. Grandfather introduced him to Mary Ellen. They shook hands politely as though they had never seen each other before. He called her Miss Gardiner and talked to her in a remote, disinterested fashion which Mary Ellen thought very amusing. She sat demurely on the living-room sofa, her hands folded in her lap, her lashes lowered to hide the smile in her eyes.

Nellie Shannon was dead. His father too had been dead for many years. A curious whim brought him to the island, his mother's legacy. Yes, he planned to stay for the rest of the summer. That was all he told them about himself and even Aunt Ella refrained from asking further questions. He talked to Grandfather about boats, to Aunt Molly about her flowers. He praised Aunt Ella's chocolate cake served on one of her rose-sprigged plates with a glass of lemonade. He was gentle, grave and charming. They liked him. Grandfather invited him for a sail in the *Wanderer,* told him the story of the stone that slew Goliath. Aunt Ella gave him half a loaf of nut bread wrapped in a fringed napkin. Aunt Molly insisted on presenting a coral pink geranium in a pot with a frilled paper petticoat.

She also gave him a needle-book as a protection against buttons and rips. It was a Christmas gift needle-book with a cover of flowered silk, rows of needles stuck in its flannel leaves. The lonesome look captivated Aunt Molly. She warned him against poison ivy and sleeping in draughts. Dear Aunt Molly with no sons of her own to mother!

Afterwards, Eric and Mary Ellen sat on the wooden

steps at the end of the lawn to watch the fireworks across the harbor. They sat quietly, not talking much, her hand resting lightly in his while the sky blossomed with flowers of flame and rockets whizzed above the treetops. Behind them on the lawn the Peterson children, Nancy and Dick and Sister, darted about whirling sparklers in wreaths of blue white stars. Their voices shrill with excitement rose above the hum of conversation on the veranda. Mr. Jackson set off pinwheels and flower-pots. Torches set in the grass burned with a ruddy glow, cast weird shadows about the dancing small figures. Miss Lillie Belle held a box of matches for Mr. Jackson and shrieked when things went off. Madame Cavella talked to Grandfather and munched bonbons under cover of the darkness. Mrs. Foster thought they should be attending the band concert in the square. Mr. Foster demurred. His spirit was willing but his feet were tired.

The babble of voices, the distant blare of the Mayport band, the fizz of exploding rockets had seemed to Mary Ellen sounds from another world. She was alone with Eric in a tremulous world of her own, content because his shoulder touched hers, his fingers formed a nest for her hand. They had talked in brief, unrelated fragments. . . .

"What tiny hands you have, Mary Ellen."

"A dragon! See, Eric. Over the church steeple. He's curling his prickly tail!"

"Funny child!"

"O dear! That one isn't going off! Yes, it is. O-h-h-h—lovely! It looks like a fountain made of stars!"

"There are stars in your eyes, Mary Ellen."

"A bonfire on the rocks! Isn't it a big one? The sparks have wings! "

"How old are you? "

"Six and a half."

"You make me feel about seven. I've lost twenty years. Am I shrinking? "

"'The Stars and Stripes Forever.' The band always shows off with that. It's the only one they really know. Oh, they're putting tar barrels on the fire! Isn't it fun? "

"Everything is fun with you. I'm constantly wondering what will happen next."

"Are you glad you came to the island? "

"Very glad."

"That's nice. So am I."

Silence—a warm tingling silence. In Mary Ellen's heart the singing of happy birds. Restless fancies no longer filled her mind; the longing was satisfied. Eric had come to live with her in a kingdom beside the sea. . . .

The *Cockle Shell* drifted into the shadow of the island, rubbed gently against the dock. Mary Ellen climbed out, tied up, lifted the basket from the seat in the bow. Eric's boat was not anchored as usual to the dock. He had probably gone over to the village and would soon return. The orange flag fluttered a welcome. Mary Ellen with her basket on her arm followed the path sloping up to the Palace door. It was a tidy path now. The underbrush had been cut away. No straggling branches reached for her hair, threatened her eyes. The roof was patched with new shingles;

the chimney no longer gaped. The spell at last was broken. Tarpaper Palace had come to life.

She walked around to the kitchen door, entered, placed her basket on the table. The floor was freshly swept, the shelves lined with scalloped blue paper. There was a blue checked curtain at the window, checked blue oilcloth on the table. Shining pans hung on hooks around the walls. Mary Ellen thought it quite perfect even to Aunt Molly's geranium on the window sill. She felt the earth in the pot. Dry as a bone. Eric never remembered to water it. She dipped a cup of water from the pail beside the door, poured it around the roots of the plant. It was pleasant to water flowers for someone you liked. She stooped over and brushed her lips against the geranium's velvety leaves.

She wandered into the long room which formed the lower stronghold of the Palace. Her work-basket was there and the turkey red curtains still unhemmed. In the doorway she paused, glanced around the room, hugged herself with a little gesture of sheer delight. It was no longer bare and forlorn, an abode for mice and cobwebs. It looked as though people lived there, nice people with charming taste.

The fireplace had been repaired. Andirons of twisted metal supported a driftwood log ready to be lighted on the first cool day. Shovel and tongs, a toasting fork with a rooster's head at the end leaned against the rough plastered stones. A burnished bronze kettle hung from an iron bracket. On a hooked rug before the hearth a rust-red schooner ploughed a blue wool sea. The couch was a cot covered with an Indian

blanket, and strewn with a variety of plump comfortable cushions in slips of blue and orange and poppy wreathed cretonne.

There were two chairs; a wing chair upholstered in faded chintz, a slat-backed rocker painted green. The tin trunk had been freighted with books. They stood now in oddly assorted rows on the shelves beneath the window; Pater, Anatole France, "Peter Pan," "The Shropshire Lad," "Cyrano," "Alice in Wonderland." A painted green table mirrored sprigs of bayberry in a luster bowl; Eric's pipe; Mary Ellen's sewing basket with its beaded tassel.

The tower steps no longer threatened death to intrepid climbers. They were mended with new boards nailed roughly but securely into place. Eric slept in the square tower at the top of the stairs on clear nights when the sky was peppered with stars. His bed was a folding cot equipped with a rubber blanket in case of rain. It was, indeed, a curious sort of a palace. There were no tapestries nor gilded scroll work, no footstools nor marble stairs. A lovely sort of a palace with Eric's pipe on the table, his chair beside the fire.

Her eyes traveled slowly about the room, caressed the bronze kettle, the rug, the chintz-covered chair. Each object recalled a memory; each marked an adventure. The andirons came from a shop in Rockville. So did the toasting fork and the bronze kettle. They drove over one afternoon on the bus. The driver of the bus had a three-cornered notch cut out of his left nostril. Eric said his wife did it with her embroidery scissors so she could identify him in case of an accident. Eric's comments on people and things

never failed to amuse her. They wandered through the streets of the quaint little town, Eric with an andiron under each arm, Mary Ellen carrying the kettle and the toasting fork. People stared at them but they did not care. In a bright yellow tea house called " The Jack O' Lantern " they had lobster sandwiches. There were ragged robins in a bowl on the table. Eric said they were his favorite flowers and tucked one into his coat lapel. That evening Mary Ellen planted four packages of ragged robin seeds around the bathhouse at the edge of the Gray Gables lawn.

The chairs, the table and the cot came from a second-hand store on the other side of the harbor. They had been transported to the island in Eric's boat, Mary Ellen perched precariously on top of the heap. She recalled the proprietor of the shop, a bent little man with an incredible beard. He urged plush rockers upon them, mirrors framed in tarnished gilt, a red glass lemonade-set warty as a squash. Eric was putty in his hands but Mary Ellen had been firm. They escaped at last with no undesirable purchases save an umbrella jar covered with bits of broken china imbedded in plaster of paris. Eric said it would be cheerful on rainy days. It stood in the corner filled with ferns.

Drifting along the margin of the bay in the *Cockle Shell* they had discovered the crooked gray house where an old sailor sat all day in the open door patiently hooking rugs. His legs had been crushed by a falling spar and necessity had taught his fingers to use the carved bone hook. Eric talked to him a long time while Mary Ellen fed bits of sweet chocolate to the shaggy old dog napping in the sunshine. They

bought the rug with the rust-red schooner and the old man, grateful for company, gave Mary Ellen a bottle with a boat cunningly fitted inside and a necklace of carved peach stones.

She liked it all. Every morning she woke with a thrill of expectancy wondering what new adventure the day would hold. She sang as she dusted, cut the butter in golden squares, helped Ruby to make the beds. Eric was different from anyone she had ever known. At times he was gay and amusing; grave at times, detached, remote but always very dear. His moments of nonsense delighted her; the gray moods moved her to tenderness. With no conscious effort she fitted her mood to his, content to be with him, to know that he liked her there. She wondered about him but seldom asked questions. He was a delightful playmate, part of the summer world of sun and sea and air. She lived in the present, gave no thought to the future, accepted his companionship with the unquestioning confidence of a child. Life moved to a happy rhythm. She was no longer lonely. That was quite enough.

A half-opened package lay on the couch. Mary Ellen crossed the room to investigate. Shirts returned from the laundry and all of them needing buttons. She folded them across her arm, took her sewing basket from the table and settled down on the steps beneath the trumpet vines. There was a bottle of buttons in the basket. She poured them into her lap, selected those of a suitable size. Humming contentedly she threaded a needle and set to work. Men were so helpless, poor dears!

Presently she heard the sound of a motorboat chug-

ging across the harbor. It stopped at the landing, gave a final splutter and was silent. Eric came up the path, moving toward the Palace in long easy strides. He wore khaki trousers, high laced boots, a flannel shirt open at the throat. His eyes brightened at the sight of Mary Ellen sitting demurely on his doorstep, sewing on buttons with a housewifely pucker between her curving dark brows.

"Hello, pretty girl!" he called half-way up the path.

"You're very impolite," scolded Mary Ellen. "You told me to come and you weren't here."

"I'm sorry." He dropped down on the carpet of pine-needles, rested his head against the Palace wall. "What are you doing?"

"Sewing on buttons. These shirts were a disgrace. After Aunt Molly gave you a needle-book too!"

"Needles aren't much use without buttons and thread." He smiled at her, an amused expression in his eyes.

"Men are untidy creatures," said Mary Ellen sewing rapidly to discipline her hands. They wanted so much to smooth his hair tousled by the wind.

"You're a sweet child, Mary Ellen. No one ever sewed on buttons for me before."

"Poor little boy!"

"No one ever took care of me."

"Don't you like it?"

"Of course, but it frightens me. Makes me think you can't be real."

"I am."

"Honestly?"

"Pinch me and see."

"Funny child!"

There was silence for a moment. Mary Ellen wound the thread around a button, her eyes intent on her work. Eric brushed the pine-needles into a pile, sifted them through his fingers.

"What do you think about when you sew on buttons?" he asked presently.

"Must I tell you?"

"You must tell me everything you think."

"Oh dear!" sighed Mary Ellen.

"That's the price you pay for knowing me."

"I can't talk the way you do."

"Shy?"

"Frightfully."

"I won't look. Tell me what you are thinking."

"I'm thinking you don't tell the truth," said Mary Ellen lightly.

"Why not?"

"I'm not pretty."

"Of course you are. Doesn't everyone think you are pretty?"

"No one has ever told me except you."

"They're stupid."

"My eyes are queer."

"I like them. You look like a lady Pan."

"What's that, please?"

"A shy, wild dryad girl. I never expected to see one. That's why I was speechless for a moment when you popped your head in my window the other day. I couldn't believe you were real."

"It doesn't seem real—any of it," said Mary Ellen softly.

"It isn't." His fingers raked the pine-needles into a heap, scattered them absently. "Sometime you'll sail off on the crescent moon, Tarpaper Palace will vanish and I'll wake up chained to a desk in the city. Please don't sail off."

Sail off and leave him! Never see again the rusty plumes in his hair, smile at his nonsense, walk beside him along the winding Cape Queen roads! Icy fingers clutched Mary Ellen's heart.

"I won't. Oh, I won't," she said with childish seriousness.

"That makes me feel better." His lips smiled but his eyes were grave. He slipped down on the pine-needles, folded his arms beneath his head, gazed off through the treetops into the blue of the summer sky.

"It's fun playing around with you," he said after a pause.

A warm pink flush stained her cheeks. Green candles flamed in her eyes.

"I like it too," she said shyly.

"I've never known a girl like you. You're so young, so delightfully young."

"I'm twenty years old," she said with a little show of dignity.

"I don't believe it. You're six and a half and you still believe in Santa Claus. Right now you're watching for a fairy to hang her washing on that cobweb." He pointed to a slender thread of silver strung between the bushes close to the ground.

"It's Friday," said Mary Ellen. "Fairies are good housewives. They do their washing on Monday."

Eric smiled. "It's nice to see the world through

your green eyes, Mary Ellen. When I walk through the village alone it's a dreary huddle of houses and stores filled with commonplace people. When you are with me, it seems quaint and amusing. You are my rose-colored spectacles, pretty girl."

The warm pink flush deepened. Mary Ellen felt a curious desire to cry. No one had ever told her beautiful things like that. Rose-colored spectacles! She looked intently at the tip of the needle, dark lashes veiling her eyes.

He talked to her then of places he had visited, New Orleans in carnival time, Bermuda, a camp in the woods of Maine, Quebec and Nova Scotia. His words painted vivid pictures for her, roused in her mind a thousand fancies. She wondered who had traveled with him to those delightful far-away places. She listened for intimate details, tried to find in his words an answer to the questions she was too shy to ask. His conversation told her nothing about himself. He spoke of mountains and lakes, of donkey carts and hibiscus blooms, of church bells and speckled trout. But he did not mention a companion, used always the singular pronoun. Mary Ellen gave up the attempt. After all what difference did it make? She determined not to be curious. Sometime perhaps he would tell her. She was content to wait.

"You've traveled a great deal," she remarked when Eric had finished his narrative.

"I'm constantly running away."

"From what?" she asked in some surprise.

"Myself, I guess. And I never succeed. I'm a restless soul."

"Aren't you ever contented, anywhere?"

"I am contented now," he answered. "You've done that for me. But it may not last. Please make it last." There was a pleading tone in his voice, an expression of sadness in his grave dark eyes. "I'm tired of running away."

"I'll try," she promised gravely.

"You are my rose-colored spectacles," he repeated, "my candle-light in the darkness."

Mary Ellen remembered the words, the pleading unhappy tone of his voice, the sadness in his eyes. As the *Cockle Shell* drifted across the harbor in the late afternoon sunshine, she thought of him very tenderly and determined to keep her rose-colored spectacles so brightly polished that Eric would want to stay.

* * * * * * * *

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Aunt Ella as they were washing the supper dishes that evening.

"What's the matter?" asked Mary Ellen dreamily.

"I don't know what's come over you, Mary Ellen. You salted the berries for supper and now you're puttin' the clean cups back in the dish pan!"

IV

THEY walked one evening to the lighthouse along a road that was dim with shadows, fragrant with pine and blossoming shrubs. Mary Ellen tripped along beside Eric, skipping at intervals to keep up with his long swinging stride. The dirt road was soft and springy like thick piled carpet. Their footsteps made no sound. All about them were the lazy night noises. They passed the high walls, the stretches of thick hedge which enclosed the estates on the cape. Lights from big gabled houses sifted through the surrounding trees, fell in curlicue patterns across the road. They passed grilled iron gates, pompous and forbidding; entrance ways more gracious, arching, massed with vines; Mary Ellen's favorite, the low green gate set in the last brick wall, a friendly gate with a cut out design of a heart and a crown, twin lanterns burning on either side.

"I'd like to have that kind of a gate for my garden wall," she said stopping to admire the twin lanterns and the quaint cut out design.

"Your garden wall?"

"The one I'm going to have sometime."

"Oh," said Eric, amusement and tenderness blending nicely in his voice. "You're going to have a garden?"

"A comfortable sort of garden full of hollyhocks and butterflies and an apple tree or two. I hate expensive

gardens. The flowers look as though they had their faces washed and their hair combed every day."

"You want a rowdy garden?"

"Yes," answered Mary Ellen, "cluttered and friendly. If the nasturtiums want to trail over into the snapdragon bed, I shall let them trail. It's a shame to make flowers grow in triangles and circles. Too much like geometry. I hated that."

"And shall you have a house too?" asked Eric with an amused smile.

"Of course. With eaves and casement windows."

"Don't tell me you want a fireplace and a kitchen!" exclaimed Eric in pretended alarm as they wandered on toward the lighthouse.

"Sometime."

"Dogs?"

"Half a dozen. A collie as yellow as sunshine. They're so ornamental. I shall train him to lie under the trees on the front lawn."

"Why not have iron dogs? They're more obedient."

"No thank you. I'll have real dogs, if you please."

"Certainly. As many as you like."

"An ugly little Scotch terrier like Barbara's 'Kiltie' and an airedale. They're nice with children."

"Children!" teased Eric. "Babies!"

"Children must be babies first. Anyway I like them."

"What a strange idea!"

They tramped along in silence for a moment. Then Mary Ellen said:

"When the architect makes a blue-print for my house, I'll send him Wendy's verse."

"Which one? There are several."

"And next I think I'd like to have
Gay windows all about.
Roses peeping in, you know,
And babies peeping out,"

she quoted, grateful for the kindly darkness.

"What a queer girl! Think of wanting things like that and having the courage to admit it!"

"Don't girls always want them, Eric?" asked Mary Ellen seriously.

"Lord no! The girls I've known wouldn't live for a day in Wendy's house. They couldn't get along without tiled bathrooms, sterling silver and elevator service. The things you want are all out of date."

"Yes, I know. I'm frightfully old-fashioned. I like poetry that rhymes, music with a tune and paintings that look like something. I have a sort of hoop-skirt complex but I can't seem to do anything about it."

"Don't try," said Eric drawing her hand through his arm. "It's charming. The girls I've known were orchids. Expensive and perishable. You are an old-fashioned cinnamon pink. Orchids are for special occasions, but I'd like to wear you in my buttonhole every day."

"That's lovely," said Mary Ellen softly and folded the pretty compliment away in her heart.

"But the house isn't complete," said Eric presently. "You have omitted something."

"Gracious!" she exclaimed. "Have I forgotten the broom or the teapot?"

"Something not so useful as either, perhaps, but recommended by the best decorators."

"A radio?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Oh, I know! Bridge lamps!"

"Don't spoil your house, Mary Ellen."

She puckered her brows in a puzzled frown.

"A washing machine?"

"No."

"A doll in a ruffled skirt to cover the telephone?"

"No."

"What then?"

"Aren't you planning to have a husband among other dull utilities?"

"Oh that—of course," she said in an airy indifferent tone which relegated the spouse to a dusty corner of the attic.

"What sort of a husband?"

She did not answer at once. They had passed the fork in the road and turned to follow the path to the lighthouse before she said a bit shyly:

"One who is amusing and gentle and tall," and then she added very quickly, "One who never talks about the inside of automobiles and barrels of potatoes; one who doesn't try to make you talk when you want to be quiet."

"Who does that?" asked Eric.

"Jim Mason. His father owns the big grocery store in town and Jim doesn't know about anything except potatoes and automobiles and cheese."

"Sounds dreadful," said Eric sympathetically. "Is he a candidate?"

"Oh, he's been somewhere around ever since I was ten years old," answered Mary Ellen with a patient little sigh. "Aunt Ella wants me to marry him because he's good and steady and safe."

"They're valuable qualities in a husband," Eric observed.

"But he's so uninteresting. I couldn't ever marry anybody in just a matter-of-fact, bread-and-butter sort of way. Besides Jim could never give me the Five Impossible Things."

"That sounds impressive. Like degrees in a lodge. What are they?"

"Things I want."

"Tell me," coaxed Eric amused and diverted.

"You'll laugh."

"I won't," he promised.

"Some of them are very foolish."

"We all have foolish fancies. What are yours, pretty girl?"

"I've never told anyone."

"This is the proper time and place. It's so dark I can't see you blush."

"You'll think I'm an idiot," she protested.

"I think you're a darling." His fingers tightened around her hand. "Your mind is like a Jack Horner Christmas Pie. Full of surprises. What are the Five Impossible Things—and why impossible?"

"Because I don't ever expect to get them," said Mary Ellen gravely. "There's the house with casement windows."

"What else?"

"I'd like to ride in a 'rickshaw and eat a scone."

"A scone!" laughed Eric.

"You read about them in English novels. They sound delicious."

"That's three Impossible Things. What are the other two?"

"I want to see 'the sun come up like thunder out of China 'cross the bay.'"

"Good heavens!"

"I told you some of them were foolish."

"Not so foolish as startling. Where did you get such a notion?"

"'The Road to Mandalay.' We had a boarder one summer who sang it all the time. He had a voice like a cannon roaring and when he rolled out 'thunder-r-r-r,' cold chills chased up and down my spine. I used to shiver and lose my breath. It sounded so noisy and enormous—like an explosion. I'd love to see that kind of a dawn and all the rest of it, the pagoda and the palm trees and the tinkly temple bells. Oh yes, my pleasant, impossible husband must take me to Burma before I settle down in the house with the casement windows."

"Funny child!" Eric's voice was very tender. "But there's one more Impossible Thing, Mary Ellen?"

"That isn't impossible any longer because it has already happened."

"What?"

"I wanted somebody to tell me I was pretty and you've done that—lots of times."

"So long as you keep green candles burning in your eyes and that freckle on your left eyelid, I'll be obliged to call you 'pretty girl.'"

"I won't mind. It's queer though. I thought that would be the most impossible one of all."

"Little silly! But if you could have only one of them, which would you choose?"

"The house with the casement windows," she answered promptly.

"Why?"

"Because the others are only dreams. They may not be the way I imagine them at all. A 'rickshaw may be more jolty than the Rockville bus; a scone may not be half as delicious as Aunt Ella's blueberry muffins and the dawn coming up out of China less beautiful than sunrise over our own bay right here at home. Perhaps it's nicer to keep them the way I think they are. Seeing them might spoil it all."

"You're a wise child, Mary Ellen," Eric observed. "That's the best way to keep one's dreams."

"But nothing can spoil the other one."

"Which one, pretty girl?"

"That," said Mary Ellen. "It sounds even nicer than I thought it would."

"Darling!" said Eric and squeezed her hand while the little birds who lived in her heart caroled a happy song.

* * * * * * * *

They sat on the rocks at the base of the lighthouse watching the waves curl over the breakwater. Above them the light wheeled in fantastic shafts like an enchanted windmill turned upside down. Mary Ellen lost all sense of reality. She seemed to have wandered into a strange bewildering land of mist and shadows.

For an instant a path of light would rest upon the water, a path so bright that she could see the ridges of foam on the waves, schooner lights, a buoy riding at anchor. The next instant darkness blotted out everything, save the pool of blurred silver circling their rocky perch. Then light again, followed by darkness wheeling ceaselessly around and around. It was like looking through shutters which rapidly opened and closed.

"Weird, isn't it?" She slipped her hand into Eric's.

"Frightened?"

"Just shivery."

His fingers tightened around her hand.

"It's like floating in space," he mused. "Dreaming."

"We seem a long way from home."

"Shipwrecked on the milky way."

The milky way or a desert island. What difference did it make so long as Eric was with her?

"I shouldn't mind," she said softly.

"I'll build you a house of cream cheeses. A silver house with the tinfoil still left on."

"And stars for electric lights," she added pleased with the fancy.

"Clouds for your feather bed and a patchwork quilt cut from the sunset sky."

"And," she smiled, "it wouldn't make any difference if the milkman was late in the morning."

"Always the worried housewife, aren't you?" asked Eric. "Alice in Wonderland baking biscuits with dreams in her eyes and a smooch of flour on her nose. How old are you, Mary Ellen?"

"Twenty last month. I've told you a hundred times."

"Nonsense. You're six and a half most of the time. I wish I had known you then, Mary Ellen. You must have been a darling kid."

"I was a trial. I never could manage to keep clean and once when the Baptist minister came to call he found me hung by my leather belt in the top of the apple tree. There was a scene. The Baptist minister was on the verge of proposing to Aunt Molly. After that his ardor cooled. I think he was afraid there might be a wild streak in the family. It was just as well. He had four children and an enormous Adam's apple. Aunt Molly was grateful. She bought me peppermints and a coral necklace."

Eric laughed and Mary Ellen smiled with him. Nice to be alone that way, hedged in with shadows, wrapped in drowsy sweet content. She told him about her childhood, about her mother whom she did not remember very well; the handsome, happy-go-lucky father who wandered away one morning when Mary Ellen was a baby and apparently forgot the way back home. He died in the war, heroically and with a great blaring of trumpets. There were medals. His commanding officer sent them to Mary Ellen, remembered at last after years of silence. Grandfather threatened to burn them up but she had begged to keep them "because the ribbons were pretty." Tarnished now, the ribbon a bit faded, they lay with a dozen half forgotten keepsakes in a blue satin handkerchief box on Mary Ellen's bureau.

"They say I look like my mother," Mary Ellen ex-

plained. "Only I'm not so pretty. People are always telling me that. She was much younger than Aunt Ella or Aunt Molly. She went to a girls' school in Boston and played the piano beautifully. Aunt Ella thinks my dislike for dishwater and clumsy boys is a legacy from my mother. She was dainty and fastidious and I suppose they spoiled her because she was the baby. Grandfather has a miniature of her painted on ivory. An artist who stayed with us one summer did it. She must have been lovely. I wish I had known her."

She told him about sledding in the winter, building snow castles, pulling taffy in Barbara's kitchen; about going to church with Aunt Molly and being stricken with remorse because she gave more heed to her new shoes than to the words of the minister. She recalled for him the tragedy of breaking out with measles in the middle of the summer and being carried over to Miss Judith's sunny front bedroom before the boarders should take alarm and flee.

"Miss Judith was my fairy godmother," she continued. "Every summer she lived in the house with the sundial across the road. She made illustrations for children's books and sometimes I posed for her. She had hundreds of books and she let me read them. I loved her fans and her slippers, her aristocratic manner. I used to pray that I'd look like her when I grew up. She gave me a great many books and taught me to love them. There were never any books at Gray Gables, except religious ones and a few of my mother's. Barbara's grandfather was Judge Sanborn. He had an enormous library. I used to go up there to read

almost every day. Becky Sharp and David Copperfield and Little Nell seemed more real to me than Barbara and Lolly and Alice. It nearly broke my heart when the old Judge died and the family moved away. That was the summer after my junior year in high school. But by that time I was busy and had discovered the town library. I didn't care much about real people. The ones who lived on the library shelves were more interesting. That's why the other girls thought I was queer. But I didn't mind. I was perfectly happy. Only last spring, and up until the time you came I was lonely and restless. I seemed to have outgrown the book people and there was no one else. I never feel that way now. You're nicer than Ivanhoe or Sir Galahad, even than Huckleberry Finn."

"You flatter me, Mary Ellen."

"I mean it."

"Darling!" . . .

She painted a series of pictures for Eric. There was the picture of a thin little girl with long fair braids falling over her shoulders curled up in a leather chair with "David Copperfield" in Judge Sanborn's musty, pleasant library; the picture of Mary Ellen sliding down-hill, her cheeks as red as holly berries, her long braids flying out under a woolen cap, tiny frightened hands in red woolen mittens clutching the sled rope; Mary Ellen sitting beside Aunt Molly in church, trying not to admire the toes of her new patent leather shoes. She painted for him also pictures more recent: Mary Ellen graduating from high school, reciting the class poem with appropriate gestures and shaking knees; Mary Ellen presiding over the Cherry Hill

school, easing weary small plodders along the thorny path to knowledge.

He gave her brief glimpses of his own childhood, fragments which Mary Ellen was obliged to piece together like a picture puzzle. Journeys from New York to San Francisco with his mother, bewitching Nellie Shannon, the most beloved actress of her day. Bits about his life back stage, in hotels and boarding-houses. The famous persons who called on his mother; the gifts she received; the flowers, great horseshoes wired with ferns and roses, baskets of bronze and lemon orchids, sprays of carnations, of lilies and larkspur. He gave her the barest glimpse of a lonely little boy sent away to school; spending vacations in a great gloomy house with someone he called Aunt Agatha, reading, whittling clumsy little ships, missing his mother, crying himself to sleep at night with his head stuffed under the pillow so no one might hear. A strange life for a child, Mary Ellen thought. No wonder he was different. She breathed a little prayer of gratitude for Grandfather and the aunts, for dear Miss Judith, the guardians of her own happy childhood.

A drop of water splashed against her cheek. From the distance came a dull growl of thunder.

"It's raining!" she exclaimed.

"You're right!" Eric glanced up at the sky. "Not a star. We'll have to run for it."

He pulled her to her feet, guided her over the rocks, lifted her from the ledge to the road below.

"Strap the wings to your slippers," he said as the rain fell more briskly and the growl of thunder deepened into a roar.

The storm advanced swiftly, rushed toward them with a swoop. They walked rapidly, Mary Ellen clinging to Eric's hand, stumbling over roots, laughing, winking the raindrops from her lashes. A bend in the road cut off the wheeling spokes of light. Utter darkness engulfed them, pierced at intervals by slender darts of lightning. For a time the foliage of the trees protected them from the rain but presently it came in a swirling, drenching flood. The wind howled savagely through the trees, bending the huge limbs as easily as though they had been elder twigs. A trickle of water ran down inside Mary Ellen's blouse; cold shivers chased up her spine.

"If we can make the main road, we'll get a hop," shouted Eric above the din of the storm. "Let's run!"

"I can't go any—faster," gasped Mary Ellen.

"Then I'll carry you."

"Oh, Eric! You couldn't! I'm heavy!" she protested.

"Nonsense! You're as light as one of Aunt Ella's biscuits."

He swung her up from the ground; her arms locked around his neck. How strong he was! He ran with her easily, apparently unhampered by her weight. His arms felt like bands of steel. The road was laced with running streams. She could hear his feet splashing through the water. The noise of the storm was tremendous. It roared and crackled in her ears. The limb of a tree fell directly across their path. Eric halted.

"We can't make the road, Mary Ellen."

"Oh, Eric! We must! "

"Don't be frightened. We'll crawl into shelter somewhere."

"Where, Eric? "

"I don't know."

A flash of lightning cut through the writhing trees, banished the darkness for a vivid, blue white moment.

"There's my green gate! " cried Mary Ellen.

"Let's go in."

"It may be locked."

"We'll see." He released her gently, set her feet on the spongy ground. They tried the latch and the gate swung open.

"Suppose there's a bulldog! " faltered Mary Ellen.

"Flatter him. Stroke his head and tell him he's a nice fellow."

But if there was a dog, he was temporarily off guard. No warning growl stopped them. They sped down a graveled path toward the dim outline of a house, found an enclosed veranda with the door unlocked and scurried in out of the rain.

"You get arrested for things like this," said Mary Ellen, her heart pounding frantically.

"No cops on the road to-night," comforted Eric. "And nobody home here. We'll stay until the rain lets up."

There was a couch hammock piled high with cushions on the veranda. They shook themselves, flinging off showers of raindrops, and settled into the hammock. The lightning flashed at shortening intervals; a clap of thunder crashed directly over their heads. The wind in the trees was like the swishing of waves in a storm.

Mary Ellen shamelessly cuddled her head against Eric's shoulder, slipped a cold hand into his.

"Frightened?" he asked holding her close.

Mary Ellen checked an indignant denial. She was not afraid. She rather liked thunder-storms, the rush of the wind, the zigzag streaks of lightning. Often she stayed out on the Gray Gables veranda during a storm while, inside the house, Aunt Molly sniffed violet ammonia with her feet propped up on a chair and the lady boarders shrieked in a terrified chorus. But Eric evidently expected her to be afraid. A cinnamon pink sort of girl would be. It was nice to be protected. She liked the low note of anxiety in his voice, his arm holding her tightly against his damp tweed jacket.

"A little," she answered in a small scared voice while under cover of the darkness her lips curved into a smile.

"Don't be," soothed Eric. He held her hand against his cheek. "Such a tiny hand, Mary Ellen. It's like an ivory flower with five curving, pink-tipped petals." He kissed the tips of her fingers one after the other. "An ivory flower in a bronze bowl. You and I, pretty girl. Ivory and bronze."

Mary Ellen sighed happily but Eric misunderstood.

"Don't be frightened. We're perfectly safe." He held her so closely that she could feel the beating of his heart.

"It makes you feel so little and helpless," she murmured. "Like a bug under a leaf when the hose is turned on."

"But nothing can hurt you. I'm holding you close."

Mary Ellen was thrillingly aware of the fact. For

that reason she screamed again as the thunder boomed and a fresh deluge of rain drummed against the roof.

"Darling! *Don't* be frightened. I can't stand it. I'm going to sing to you."

"You mustn't, Eric."

"Why not?"

"The bulldog might hear."

"What if he does? It's a proper song—about an old lady who sat all day in the sunshine knitting handkerchiefs for God."

"What a queer thing to do!"

"Why?"

"God doesn't need handkerchiefs. People who live in heaven never cry or have hay fever or colds in their heads."

"She made them so He could tie knots in the corners to remember things by."

"God doesn't forget things, Eric."

"The old lady thought He did."

"What sort of things?"

"He had forgotten to send her lover back to her, the tall young man who sailed away on a ship with four masts. He had forgotten to give her a paisley shawl and fill her caddy with Chinese tea. She made the corners extra large on purpose."

He sang then in whimsical, tuneless fashion about the old lady who sat all day in the sunshine knitting handkerchiefs for God. It was a song with many verses, a fantastic song, gay and amusing.

Delightful nonsense! Mary Ellen rested her head against Eric's shoulder, remembered to utter muffled little shrieks at appropriate intervals. She liked to feel

his arm tighten around her, liked the reassuring pressure of his hand, his voice mingling with the wind and the rain. Her thoughts wandered, curiously enough, to Barbara and the kitchen of the big white house on the hill. She recalled old Hallie who came with Barbara's mother from Virginia. Hallie was as black as charcoal and terrified in a storm. She wrapped her tufts of kinky gray wool with string to keep off "hants" and sat with her feet in the oven, her enormous black hands clapped over her ears recounting strange stories of flaming swords and the trump of doom. Barbara was accustomed to them but Mary Ellen marveled and thrilled. Funny old Hallie! She almost laughed, remembered just in time to change the merry sound into a scream which blended suitably with the din of a retreating thunder clap.

"Don't be frightened!" Eric left his old lady to knit her handkerchiefs without his assistance. "It will soon be over. The thunder isn't nearly so heavy. Tell me what you are looking for out there in the storm."

"Gabriel," Mary Ellen answered.

"Gabriel!"

"The colored cook who used to live at Barbara's said the lightning would rip the sky open sometime and Gabriel would come trompin' down through the clouds leading the heavenly hosts. I've been looking for him all my life."

"Funny child!"

"One morning after a storm I found four white feathers on the lawn. I was broken-hearted. I thought Gabriel had come and I had missed him. It was like

waking up to find you had slept through the circus parade."

Eric laughed.

"Aunt Ella said they were gull feathers but they were so tiny and soft and white. I was sure they had dropped from the wings of a very small angel. I hid them in my handkerchief box. I thought the baby angel would come back to look for them like Peter Pan did for his shadow."

And then because a considerable length of time had elapsed since her last demonstration, she uttered a faint little shriek. Alas for deception! At that moment a flash of lightning brightened the porch. Eric saw very plainly the smile lurking at the corners of her mouth, the mischievous shine in her eyes.

"You're a fakir, Mary Ellen," he said severely, "a darling little fakir." And tilting her chin he kissed the coral pink curve of her lips.

* * * * * * * *

"That you, Mary Ellen?" called Aunt Ella as she tiptoed past her aunt's bedroom door very much later that evening.

"Yes, darling."

"Where were you during the storm?"

"Out near the lighthouse."

"Gracious! Aren't you drenched?"

"We stopped on somebody's porch."

"Weren't you scared?"

"Frightfully!" said Mary Ellen and with a gay little smile on her lips she climbed the last flight of stairs to her room up under the eaves.

V

THE days passed swiftly; blue and golden days, gray days wrapped in a curtain of rain. The rose-vines trailing against the Gray Gables fence budded, blossomed, scattered drifts of petals across the lawn. Hollyhocks took their place, great satin rosettes, pink and yellow, deep wine-red. Marigolds spilled in golden showers over the painted green tubs that flanked the veranda steps. The tomatoes in the kitchen garden showed faint pink streaks.

The Fosters departed for Pittsburgh and Mrs. Smithers came the next day with her poodle, her ailments and her old-fashioned round-top trunk to occupy the Fosters' deserted room. She was a waspish little old lady with sharp features, a crimped transformation, tiny veined hands loaded with rings and a talent for gossip. She spent a part of every summer at Gray Gables. Her husband had died sometime in the remote past. "Pestered into the grave and glad to get there," was Grandfather's verdict. Mrs. Smithers referred to him as "poor dear Horace" and wearied her listeners with frequent enumerations of his virtues. "She couldn't have found a virtue in him with a spy-glass when he was alive," Grandfather was wont to remark on such occasions. "Seems a shame a body has to die before folks find out he's fit to live with."

Mrs. Smithers claimed the privileges of an oldest boarder, the airiest bedroom, four pillows on account of the asthma, a seat in the dining-room beside the har-

bor window, the breast of the chicken, and cream for "Daisy Darling," her decrepit, ill-tempered dog. She irritated the other boarders, demanded a vast amount of attention, and was subject to fainting spells which upset the entire household. She was a trial, a thorn in the flesh, a perpetual lesson in patience.

Mrs. Smithers' arrival this year made little impression upon Mary Ellen. She was too happy to be distressed by one gossipy old lady or a dozen, or by a whole kennel full of yapping small dogs. She moved through the house with a smile on her lips, dreams in her shining eyes. Grandfather, the aunts, the boarders were only shadows. Eric was the one reality of her life. Trifles lost their power to annoy her; familiar objects wore a new enchantment. She glowed with an inner radiance which tinged her cheeks with rose and lighted green tapers in her eyes.

"You're gettin' real pretty, Mary Ellen," observed Ruby one morning looking at her across the kitchen table.

"That's a doubtful compliment." Mary Ellen briskly polished a spoon.

"Oh, you weren't ever real homely," said Ruby generously. "But you look different somehow. Sort of lighted up."

"It's the weather," answered Mary Ellen. "I've never seen a more beautiful day."

"I don't know as I'd blame it all on the weather." Ruby's pale blue eyes twinkled shrewdly. "Bet I could mention somethin' that has a heap more to do with it."

"What?" dared Mary Ellen.

"Your long-legged gentleman friend."

"Don't be silly!" Mary Ellen rubbed the spoon with unnecessary vigor, her lashes lowered to hide the telltale light in her eyes.

"You're blushin'!" teased Ruby.

"I'm not."

"Your face is as red as a beet."

"It's hot in here."

"I didn't notice it. My face isn't red. Mad?" she asked as Mary Ellen rose with a handful of spoons.

"Of course not. I'm going to put these away."

"I didn't mean anything," said Ruby contritely.

"That's all right." Mary Ellen paused beside Ruby's chair and dropped a kiss on her ear. She loved Ruby and was sorry for her. Poor Ruby who was engaged to pudgy George Bivins and looking forward to nothing more glamorous than life in a snuff-colored cottage on the other side of town. Did George ever invent songs for Ruby or kiss the tips of her fingers? A wave of sympathy for all the girls in the world flooded Mary Ellen's heart. What happiness could life hold for anyone who did not know Eric? She went into the dining-room, slipped the spoons into their flannel jackets. Then she wandered out into the hall and peeped in the hat-rack mirror. Was she prettier? Perhaps. There was a soft shining light in her eyes, a laughing tilt at the corners of her mouth. A dozen new freckles. What did it matter? Eric liked freckles. The opinions of other people had no meaning. Eric absorbed her completely.

They sailed and swam, idled about on the rocks. Sometimes they rode on the bus to Half Moon Beach.

There they swam in the clear cold water, green as melted jade. Eric built castles for her, moulded towers and turrets from the moist sand. The variety of his accomplishments never failed to amaze her. He invented stories for her, carved ships from bits of driftwood, tiny gay ships with riggings of thread and silken sails. A whole flotilla of them lay at anchor on her bureau up under the Gray Gables roof. She marveled at the dexterity of his long sensitive fingers, carving a figurehead for a miniature vessel, knotting the rigging thread with skill and precision. She wondered if he were an artist or a sculptor, perhaps.

His fingers were fashioned to create beautiful things. It was incredible that his skill should be used only to amuse her. She wondered about it for a long while and then one day she asked an astonishing number of questions.

"Don't you ever do anything?" she began. She sat on a rocky throne swinging her bare tanned legs. Eric lay on the ledge at her feet, his arms folded under his head.

"What was that?" he asked lazily.

"I said, don't you ever do anything?"

"I amuse you all day long."

"Useful things."

"Hardly ever."

"Write books?"

"No."

"Paint?"

"Lord, no!"

"Build bridges?"

"Couldn't if I tried."

"Sell life insurance?"

"No—Nor tune pianos nor dive for pearls."

"Why don't you?"

"I don't like pearls and, besides, the water gets in my ears."

"I mean," said Mary Ellen as severely as was possible with Eric smiling up at her in lazy amusement, "why don't you do something—write books or paint or build a bridge?"

"What's the use?"

"Oh, my goodness! What's the use of anything?"

"That's what I want to know."

"You might become rich and famous," suggested Mary Ellen.

"Famous people have no privacy. The whole world would have to know what color pajamas I wear."

"Don't you want to get anywhere?"

"Up there with you."

"There's no room. And besides you're dodging. You know very well what I mean. Wouldn't you like to paint a picture?"

"Too many people paint pictures. I'd rather be a good bricklayer."

"Well, why aren't you?"

"Too lazy I guess."

"You ought to be ashamed."

"Look here, young lady!" Eric turned over, rested his elbow on the rock ledge, his head on the palm of his hand. "Are you scolding me?"

"I'm trying to," said Mary Ellen finding it very difficult when he smiled directly into her eyes.

"What for?"

"It's too bad to be useless."

"Since I'm not even beautiful. But at least I'm entertaining. Please tell me I'm entertaining, pretty girl."

"You ought to do something," said Mary Ellen firmly.

"I make ships for you," he said in an aggrieved voice.

"And I love them. But you ought to do something useful."

"There's no one in the world who cares whether I do or not." His voice was grave; a hint of sadness crept into his eyes.

Mary Ellen wanted to slip down beside him and smooth his hair; tell him he was a darling just as he was and it didn't matter whether or not he ever did anything useful. Instead she said with only a bit of a catch in her voice:

"I care, Eric."

His eyes brightened, smiled up at her. "You're lovely in a green bathing suit. Take off that cap and let down your hair, Rapunzel. I'll climb to your tower window."

"I'll not be diverted by flattery," answered Mary Ellen. "You ought to care about doing things. For your own sake."

"I don't somehow. I'm an abandoned creature."

"How do you manage to live?"

"Like Elijah, I am fed by the ravens. There are two of them. Messrs. Crosby and Small, attorneys-at-law. Gloomy old chaps. They don't approve of me."

"You don't look like that sort of a person." Mary Ellen viewed him critically, her head tilted a little to one side.

"What sort?"

"Useless."

Eric remained serenely unchastened.

"That's how I get away with it," he said. "People think I'm an energetic young man. By the time they've discovered their mistake, I'm on my way. It is a simple process but effective."

"Let me see your hand." Mary Ellen slipped down on the rock ledge beside him.

He obligingly extended his right hand. She took it in both her own, studied it intently, the firm square palm, the long flexible fingers tipped with nails nicely kept.

"Do you see a blonde lady with a bank account in my hand?" he asked.

"I see four calloused places and a scar," said Mary Ellen.

"I had them put on so pretty girls who hold my hand will think I'm useful."

"How did you get them?"

"Throwing rocks at the ravens."

"Please, Eric. I want to know."

"An axe slipped. That accounts for the scar."

"An axe!" exclaimed Mary Ellen.

"I spent part of one winter in a lumber camp. An axe is temperamental. Took me three weeks to tame it. Before I left I could chop with the best of them."

"What did you do that for?"

"It was a new experience. Besides that, after

chopping trees all day I was tired enough to sleep at night."

"But that was useful," said Mary Ellen.

"I didn't do it to be useful. It amused me for a time and I learned to sleep without dreaming."

What a queer person he was! The tip of Mary Ellen's finger stroked the jagged white scar. She pictured him in the woods swinging an axe through the frosty air, snowflakes clinging to his lashes, powdering his sheepskin coat. "To sleep without dreaming." She wondered what unhappy memory pursued him, crept unbidden into his dreams. . . .

"How did you get these?" she asked after a pause, touching the calloused places in the palm of his hand.

"Souvenirs from the Chrystobel," he answered.

"What is that, please?"

"A mine in Colorado. I worked there once."

"What did you do?"

"Ran an ore car. It traveled at an enormous rate of speed through winding mine shafts black as pitch. If there had been a collision, I'd be entertaining the lady angels now instead of a pretty girl who scolds."

Mary Ellen shuddered. Suppose there had been a collision! A crash and a roar in the darkness! Eric killed. Suppose he had never lived to reach Tarpaper Palace! She bent her head, brushed her lips across his hand.

"That's because I'm grateful," she said with a little catch in her voice.

"For what?"

"That there wasn't a collision."

"Sweet child!" said Eric softly. "I shouldn't

have minded at the time. It was thrilling to swoop through the darkness, especially when it didn't much matter whether or not the car stayed on the track. Now I'm glad. I shouldn't have wanted to miss you, Mary Ellen. I like you even when you scold."

"That's good. I probably shall again."

"Would you like me better if I did useful things?" he asked presently.

"I think you would be happier," she answered.

"Perhaps," he agreed. "You are as wise as you are sweet, Mary Ellen. But I can beat you swimming. Come on. Let's race to the spindle and back."

He rose, pulled her up on her feet and together they plunged from the rock ledge into the cold gray-green water of the bay.

* * * * * * * *

Miss Lillie Belle was late to dinner the next day. Mary Ellen served her after the other guests had left the dining-room.

"Where do you suppose I saw your nice Mr. Swann this morning?" asked the artistic lady from Kansas City scooping up dainty bites of cottage pudding.

"I've no idea," answered Mary Ellen, her heart beating more quickly at the mention of Eric's name.

"It was the funniest thing!" Miss Lillie Belle's conversation bristled with exclamation marks. Nothing ordinary and commonplace ever happened to her. She fancied herself the heroine of countless thrilling adventures. "You know that little white house in Rockville, the one with the garden and picket fence?"

Mary Ellen nodded.

"Well, I've been wanting to paint that all summer. It's so sweet. I suppose I'm sentimental." She paused to laugh at her own folly. "But I must admit pretty things do appeal to me. And I thought if the painting came out well I'd copy it to use on calendars for Christmas presents. Anyone can always use an extra calendar and my friends love the ones I do. I made the sweetest ones last Christmas—a girl standing beside a sun dial! Everyone raved —— But what was I going to tell you? Oh, about Mr. Swann. He's frightfully distinguished looking, Mary Ellen. Could I have a bit more of that delicious sauce? . . . Thank you. . . . Well, I went over to Rockville on the bus this morning to paint the little white house. You know the one ——"

"Yes, I know," answered Mary Ellen by way of helping Miss Lillie Belle to the point of the narrative.

"Well, I went over on the bus. How they do jolt and rattle around corners! I never expected to get there alive! Well, when I had set up my easel and was all ready to begin, I discovered that I hadn't a speck of cerulean blue. The tube was perfectly dry! Isn't it maddening when things like that happen? I hid my easel and stool and paint box behind the fence and started off to find an art shop. I had to pass the dock. You know the one that isn't used and there out on the very end sat —— Who do you think?" Miss Lillie Belle paused dramatically, waved her spoon with the air of a magician about to produce a rabbit from a silk hat.

"I never could guess," smiled Mary Ellen.

"Your nice Mr. Swann," said Miss Lillie Belle with

as much emphasis as though she had not already mentioned his name. "I know it was he because I was so surprised that I walked right out on the dock. Oh dear! I caught my heel between the planks and pulled my slipper clear off! I was so mortified! I almost died when he turned around and saw me standing on one foot like a stork. He was so nice! I think his manners are lovely! He rescued the slipper and actually put it on, because there was no place to sit down and I just couldn't keep my balance standing on one foot. He's really quite handsome, Mary Ellen, but you didn't tell me he was an artist!"

"He isn't," said Mary Ellen. "Or at least if he is he doesn't admit it."

"Well, of course I'm not absolutely certain." Miss Lillie Belle lowered her voice to a mysterious whisper. "His back was toward me and my slipper came off before I quite reached him. But he was busy with something out there on the end of the dock and I'm almost sure he was *sketching!*"

When Mary Ellen asked Eric about it as they skimmed across the harbor that afternoon in Eric's boat he answered, "I was practising pot-hooks, Mary Ellen. My one ambition is to learn shorthand," and being in a gay mood he sang her a song about a frog who lived on a lily pad and was the victim of a tragic love affair "because," chanted Eric:

"The frog he loved a field mouse
And that was very sad,
For a field mouse simply cannot live
On a floating lily pad!"

The song had a great many verses. By the time Eric had completed the dolorous ballad Mary Ellen had forgotten Miss Lillie Belle's discovery in the sheer joy of the wind and the waves, the flying jets of spray.

VI

MARY ELLEN sat in the doorway of Tarpaper Palace. She wore a frock of dull green jersey and her hair fell in soft braids across her shoulders. Eric liked it that way. He railed against the pins that customarily held it in soft coils above her ears. She had left them at home, had fastened a cluster of scarlet bean flowers in the left hand braid. Leather sandals covered her feet and her slender tanned legs were bare. She was waiting for Eric, mending his sweater where it had caught and raveled on the bathhouse hook. Her fingers moved the needle slowly through the web of heavy yarn. Mary Ellen's thoughts were not concerned with her work. She was playing her favorite game.

"Oh, no! We're just here for the summer," she remarked to an invisible lady reporter. "The simple life is delightful after a season in the city. . . . Perhaps Miss Elliott would like a cup of tea, Germaine. . . . No, it isn't a bit of trouble. After your trip from New York you must be famished. . . . And some sandwiches, Germaine. Well, nut bread with cream cheese and strawberry jam. Yes, that will do nicely."

She wafted an invisible Germaine toward the kitchen and turned again to the lady reporter. "No, we never bring the maids up here. I really enjoy looking after things myself. . . . Germaine is the children's nurse. We couldn't get along without her. . . .

French? Yes. Brittany. Barbara was born there, you know. . . . Only three but sometimes they seem like a dozen. Eric, Jr., is six. . . . Yes, he looks like his father though they say he has my nose. I can't see the slightest resemblance but you know how people are. Judith, the baby, is four. She's named for Miss Judith Alderson, the artist. . . . Yes, it's quite true. I posed for some of her early illustrations. Oh, years ago! . . . I'm sorry the children aren't here. Mr. Swann took them over to the village to get their hair cut. They looked like little savages. . . .

"Bring the tea cart out here, Germaine. . . . Thank you. . . . Lemon, Miss Elliott?" Here Mary Ellen laid aside the sweater, proffered an invisible cup with a pretty show of hospitality and, it must in justice be confessed, a hint of condescension as well. "Two lumps? . . . Only one? . . . Surely you aren't afraid of getting stout! . . . No, that's one thing I don't have to worry about. I weigh scarcely an ounce more than I did when I was married. . . . Yes, it was romantic. Mr. Swann won't sell this island because it was here I met him. . . . Quite informally. I crashed through the head of a nail keg and he rescued me. . . . Oh, yes, we often laugh about it now but I can assure you it was embarrassing enough at the time. We call it Tarpaper Palace. On account of the tower, you know. Mr. Swann will not permit it to be altered. The rooms in the rear are new and the bath and boat houses but nothing inside has been changed. . . . Sentimental? Yes, I'm afraid we are. . . ."

She extended a plate of sandwiches with a charming smile.

"Do have another. They're so small. . . . Well, we hoped to travel this year. I'd like to go to Burma. . . . Oh, a strange desire I've had ever since I was a child. But I'm afraid we can't get away. When we return to the city Mr. Swann is to begin a new painting." This detail varied according to Mary Ellen's latest notion of Eric's genius. Sometimes he was about to write a book, again he had been commissioned to design the scenery and costumes for a play. On one rare occasion he was planning a series of concerts (whether vocal, piano or violin, she was unable to decide) but that seemed less probable and was never repeated. Whatever the proposed activity it was sure to be something magnificent, an undertaking which would bathe Eric and his invisible family in floods of glory.

"Yes, it is trying," she continued with a sigh and a patient smile. "But we mustn't be selfish. An artist is never permitted to live his own life. He is the slave of his public. . . ."

A sound of approaching footsteps brought the interview to an abrupt termination. Mary Ellen glanced up. Eric was swinging along the path with a child perched on his shoulder and, strangely enough, the child had a brand new haircut! For a moment the illusion was so real that she half expected to see Eric, Jr., and Baby Judith trudging along in the rear. She blinked rapidly and discovered that the child riding on Eric's shoulder was not Barbara who was born in Brittany but the oldest Peterson, Eric's shadow since

the day he had fished her out of the bay and banished her tears with peppermints. Mary Ellen picked up the neglected sweater and stitched briskly, wondering if Eric could possibly have heard. Her cheeks wore the tint of the flowers caught in her left hand braid and she looked at him in shy, darting glances. But if he had heard the conversation, he gave no sign. At a short distance from the Palace door he paused, stood gazing at the girl in the doorway with a curious expression in his eyes.

"Hello, Mary Ellen!" called the oldest Peterson. "I had a haircut and Eric brought me in his boat and we ate ice-cream with a cherry on the top."

Eric swung the child from his shoulder, set her down on her own small feet.

"Oh, is that Mary Ellen?" he asked still gazing intently at the girl in the doorway of Tarpaper Palace.

The child looked up at him, surprised and faintly bewildered.

"Yes, that's Mary Ellen," she answered.

"Are you sure?"

"'Course."

"The Mary Ellen who lives at Gray Gables and brings you a glass of milk for supper?"

The child bobbed her head.

"Oh dear!" sighed Eric. "I thought it might be someone else."

"Who?" asked the oldest Peterson, wondering if this were a new sort of game.

"I thought it might be Wendy," said Eric gravely.

The child's round eyes widened with interest.

"Peter Pan's Wendy?" she asked.

"I thought it might be. You see her dress is made of maple leaves and she doesn't wear stockings."

"P'raps it is," suggested the child, delighted with the fancy.

"I've been looking for Wendy all my life." Eric sat on the ground facing Mary Ellen, leaned against the trunk of a tree. The oldest Peterson promptly scrambled down beside him and nestled against his arm.

"Who are you?" she asked, prepared to enjoy a new sort of story.

"Me?" Eric appeared to be astonished at the question. "I'm Peter Pan."

The oldest Peterson tried to be polite but the strain on her eight-year-old credulity was too severe.

"You're too big," she objected.

"That's just to fool people. I can fold up like a measuring stick. I can make myself small enough to crawl through keyholes and sleep in a pumpkin shell. Sometimes when I'm not in a hurry I ride on a snail."

She looked at his long legs, his arms and the breadth of his shoulders. Then she glanced at Mary Ellen sewing busily in the doorway, a gay little smile on her lips.

"Can he?" she asked, sure that it couldn't be true but willing to be entertained.

"He does all sorts of curious things," said Mary Ellen. "I shouldn't be at all surprised."

"Well then, why don't you wear clothes like Peter Pan's," she inquired of Eric, "and a hat with a feather?"

"Because someone might recognize me," he explained. "Then I'd be obliged to grow up. They'd

make me go back to a stuffy office in the city and add rows of figures all day long."

"Peter Pan couldn't add. He didn't even know how old he was."

"You learn to add when you grow up. Also to write checks and other dismal things. That's why I ran away almost as soon as I was born."

"Can you fly?"

"Of course."

"Over the trees?"

"Much higher than that."

"Over the church steeple?"

"Beyond the clouds."

"Let me see you," demanded the child.

"I don't dare. So many people around. They'd think I was a bird and shoot me. It's unpleasant to be shot."

"Can you play music?"

"Delightful music," Eric agreed.

"Well, why don't you?"

"My pipes are rusty. I left them out in the rain. They make only the most dismal sort of squeaks."

"Are you cocky? Peter Pan was, you know. He liked to crow."

"Unbearably cocky at times. When I've just killed a pirate, for instance."

The child's eyes darted about the island, peered through the clustering bushes.

"What are you looking for?" Eric asked.

"The redskins. Where are they?"

"I sent them off to fight a battle. They were getting fat and lazy with so much peace."

"You aren't either Peter Pan," stated the child after a moment of reflection.

"How do you know?"

She ran her hand across Eric's chin.

"Because he was a little boy and little boys don't have whiskers."

"That's just it," Eric hastened to explain. "I knew if I had whiskers no one would suspect. They are an excellent disguise."

"How did you get them?"

"I stuck pine-needles in my chin. It was very painful."

"Is that your house?" The child pointed a small forefinger at the Palace.

"Of course. Don't you recognize it?"

"But it ought to be in the treetops."

"I was afraid that would cause talk. They don't build houses that way in these parts."

"Where are the little lost boys?"

"Fast asleep in their tree trunks. They sleep all day because they have no mothers to call them in the morning. They're an untidy lot. You ought to see the backs of their necks."

"Wouldn't Wendy take care of them?"

"I'm sure she would, if I could find her. The house is in dreadful condition. Dust everywhere—and cobwebs. Well, really it would make your heart ache to see them. All my acorn cups need polishing and my clothes are in tatters."

"Have you looked for Wendy?"

"Everywhere. Once I thought I had found her." The tone of his voice was sufficiently grave to impress

not only the child but the girl in the doorway. "She was as beautiful as even Wendy could be—but she wasn't Wendy at all."

"How did you know?" asked the child.

"She hated spring house-cleaning and my little house in the treetops. She thought it was shabby and dull. She said she could never live so far away from the shops and theatres. Besides, my house had no elevator service, or doormen in gold-buttoned livery. And she wouldn't wear frocks made of maple leaves with acorns for buttons. She wanted diamond buttons. She thought me a dull sort of fellow, because I couldn't add and write checks. And she grew weary of the music of my pipes; she longed for a livelier tune."

Eric appeared to have forgotten his audience. He spoke as though he were talking to himself. Mary Ellen listened intently. His words were light as tufts of thistledown, trifling words to amuse a round-eyed child, but through them ran a serious note. She wondered if he did it consciously, if he were trying to tell her something about his life in this gay, inconsequent fashion. Impossible to be sure. His conversation was spun from twisted threads of fact and fancy. It was difficult to separate them. Was there a girl, somewhere in the shadowed past. . . . A girl who had grown weary of his music . . . danced off to a livelier tune . . . left the lonesome look in his eyes. . . .

"What happened to her?"

"Captain Hook came along."

"O-o-o-o!" shivered the child.

"He had ruffles of lace and a brocade vest. There

were silver buckles on his slippers and the hold of his ship was freighted with pirate gold."

"Did he get her?"

"Yes, he got her," said Eric simply.

"Why didn't you make him give her back?"

Eric was silent for a moment. Mary Ellen scarcely dared to breathe.

"She liked his ruffles and his brocade vest," he answered presently. "There were endless pleasures to be bought with his pirate gold. And I didn't want my house in the treetops to be a prison. . . ."

"But that didn't matter," the child reminded him. "Because she wasn't Wendy."

"No," agreed Eric. "She wasn't. I think she was Helen of Troy. I'm still looking for Wendy."

"How will you know when you find her?"

"By the freckle on her left eyelid."

"Does Wendy have a freckle on her left eyelid?"

"Yes and two on the tip of her ear. Dozens across her nose."

"I have freckles," suggested the child.

He peered critically at her small, tilted nose.

"Not like Wendy's. Hers are golden. I think a fairy sprinkled stardust over her face when she was sleeping outdoors one night. And Wendy's eyes are green."

"Green!" exclaimed the oldest Peterson.

"Sea green and they shine like Christmas tree candles. Her face is the shape of a heart and there's always a smile on her lips because she thinks pleasant thoughts."

"Does she have yellow hair?"

"Not yellow," Eric objected. "That sounds like lemons. Imagine a girl with lemon-colored hair! Wendy's hair is pale gold and she wears it in twisted braids. She has tiny feet and hands that know how to sew. Her laugh is like silver bells swinging in the wind and I'm sure she makes excellent biscuits."

The child looked at Mary Ellen, flushed and starry eyed, mending Eric's sweater in the doorway of Tarpaper Palace. Then she glanced up at Eric, a sly, understanding smile quirking the corners of her mouth.

"Well, you needn't look any longer. I think you have found her," she said.

VII

A TELEGRAM of impressive length announced Lita's approach. Aunt Ella came out on the kitchen porch one morning with the yellow sheet in her hand.

"Do you suppose we could fix up that extra room on the third floor?" she asked dropping into a rocker.

"What for?" Mary Ellen was picking over blueberries on the top step, her fingers purple stained, splashes of purple dotting her linen frock.

"I had a telegram from Grace Wetherill. She wants us to take Lita for the rest of the summer."

"Lita?" queried Aunt Molly.

"You remember. She was here with Grace one summer about —— Goodness how the time does fly! It must have been eight years ago."

"Lolita! The Angel Child!" There was dismay in Mary Ellen's voice.

"Calls herself Lita now." Aunt Ella referred to the telegram. "She's comin' to art school."

"Heaven help us!" Mary Ellen fervently exclaimed.

She recalled a pale bossy little girl in an expensive hand-smocked dress, a little girl who lay on her stomach and kicked and screamed until she got what she wanted, a precocious little girl who had lived too much in hotels. They called her the "Angel Child" because in the opinion of her doting mother Lolita could do no wrong. Her visit at Gray Gables was an unpleasant memory.

"Wire her there's no room," said Mary Ellen firmly.

"Well, I don't know as I ought. Grace is a relative, you know."

"Third cousin? Or is it fourth?" asked Aunt Molly whose memory was a bit uncertain.

"Grace is Cousin John Bisbee's daughter. That makes her our third cousin and Mary Ellen's fourth."

"So, of course, we have to be bothered with her."

"Now, Mary Ellen," said Aunt Ella, worried lines creasing her brow. "I don't want to put you out but Grace seems real anxious we should take her. She's goin' to Europe with her husband who's in poor health, as near as I can make out." She glanced again at the telegram.

"They're real well off," added Aunt Molly.

"Gracious yes!" answered Aunt Ella. "Copper mines or something of the kind."

"There's no place for her," insisted Mary Ellen.

"Well now—if we could clear out that room next to yours ——"

"Heavens! You couldn't put her up there!"

"I guess Grace wants us to keep an eye on her," mused Aunt Ella. "She can't be more than eighteen."

"She'll condescend to the rest of us and want her breakfast served in bed."

"It might be real pleasant to have a girl near your own age around, Mary Ellen," ventured Aunt Molly.

"I don't want her," said Mary Ellen and thought to herself, "She'll spoil everything. Why *will* Aunt Ella be such a goose about relatives?"

"Well, I can understand that Grace wouldn't want her here alone with no one to look after her," said Aunt Ella.

"Oh, nonsense! They just want a place to leave her while they go abroad. You let people impose on you, Aunt Ella."

"I don't know as you'd call it imposin'," said Aunt Ella mildly. "It's pleasant to do favors for folks—relatives especially. Seems as though we ought——"

"Grace used to visit us when we were girls," added Aunt Molly. "Seems as though—for the sake of old times——"

Mary Ellen smiled, her resentment gone.

"You're a pair of geese," she scolded affectionately, "and as sentimental as dried rose petals. But you're darling geese and I love you. Run along and send your telegram, Aunt Ella. But," she added darkly, "if she dares to condescend I'll show her the silver soup ladle and the letter Abraham Lincoln wrote Great-Aunt Ellen."

So a telegram was dispatched and the room on the third floor made ready for Lita.

"It looks real nice," said Aunt Molly when the task was completed.

"Well anyway, it's the best we can do," sighed Mary Ellen hanging a colored print over the water stain on the wall.

"It's good enough for anybody," remarked Aunt Ella, smoothing the cream and yellow counterpane and folding her best patchwork quilt across the foot of the bed.

"She'll turn up her nose at it," said Mary Ellen crossly. She was tired. Her back ached and her hands were splotched with green paint. She had missed two afternoons with Eric to hammer and pound

and stitch. If only Aunt Ella wasn't such a soft-hearted goose!

"Mary Ellen!" Ruby's voice shrilled up the stairs, Ruby's head with its uneven curling-iron waves bobbed over the top step. "Mr. Swann's waiting downstairs," she announced, pleased to be the bearer of important tidings. "He wants to know if you can get off and have supper with him somewhere. Gee, that room looks swell!"

The cross feeling vanished; the aching back was miraculously eased. In Mary Ellen's heart the little birds plucked their heads from under their feathers, trilled a happy song. Eric was waiting!

"You've been workin' hard, Mary Ellen," said Aunt Ella kindly. "You run along with Eric."

"But for supper, Aunt Ella?"

"We'll manage somehow."

"I'll wait on your tables," offered Aunt Molly.

"Some of 'em's goin' on a picnic," added Ruby. "We can get along all right."

"And I'll ask Mr. Jackson to meet Lita at the train," said Aunt Ella disposing of the last objection.

So Mary Ellen slipped into the frock Eric liked best, the flower-sprigged silk one with its tight basque and full gathered skirt, pinned Grandmother Hollis' cameo in the lace collar, snapped around her wrists the bracelets that matched. She tilted her leghorn hat to a becoming angle, powdered her nose and, forgetting the paint stains, tripped down to meet Eric, her heart as light as her heels.

They had supper at a tea-house on the hill above the harbor. It was pleasant to eat out of doors, to be

served by a waitress in a rose-colored smock. Mary Ellen smiled happily at Eric from under the shadowy brim of her hat.

"You look sweet, Mary Ellen. I like that dress."

"Oh, Eric! This old thing!"

"You know I do."

"Of course. That's why I wore it."

"Darling!" . . .

The soup arrived in pottery bowls banded with strips of blue. There were crescent rolls sprinkled with poppy seeds. The tinted goblets made the water look like wine; amber for Mary Ellen, claret colored for Eric. It tasted flat and disappointing. Water when you'd expected wine. There were little cakes with pink frosting and squidgy stuff inside. Eric laughed at her attempts to eat them daintily, threatened to tie her napkin bib-fashion under her chin. They sat for a long while on the terrace, spreading crackers with soft crumbly cheese, watching the sunset clouds change from flame to rose, from rose to faintest pink.

Later they rode in town on a bus, wandered along the main street, into a movie house. The picture was a special one. There were a great many people in the lobby. Eric joined the line which moved like a giant caterpillar toward the ticket window. Mary Ellen waited at one side. Her eyes followed him, admired the back of his head rising superbly above the other heads in the line. He did look distinguished. People noticed him, nudged each other, classed him, no doubt, with the eccentric great who summered in Mayport. And he liked her; little Mary Ellen, not very pretty, not very wise, in a home-made frock and a home-

trimmed hat. The miracle of it! The beautiful, breath-taking miracle! . . .

"Well, look who's here!"

The voice was familiar. Mary Ellen wheeled around.

"Why, Lolly!"

"I haven't seen you for ages!"

"Longer than that."

"You look fine."

"So do you."

Mary Ellen smiled at Lolly. How pretty she was! Her skin beneath the disfiguring rouge was like apricots and cream. Her eyes were the color of hothouse violets, widely spaced, extravagantly lashed. The tendrils of hair curling out under her cheap velvet hat seemed spun from tawny silk. But why would she use so much lipstick, smear blue stuff around her eyes? And the perfume! Whew!

"Saw Jim Mason the other night," Lolly was saying. "He said he hadn't seen you for ages. Did you and Jim have a fight?"

"Oh, no."

"He's rushing Irene Taylor now."

"Is he?" There was not the faintest suggestion of interest in Mary Ellen's voice.

Lolly turned toward the shuffling line.

"We'll have to wait ages. Joe's at the very end."

"Are you with Joe Bandarra?" Mary Ellen asked.

"Most always. Joe's a swell dancer. Which one's your boy friend?"

"The tall one. Third from the window," said Mary Ellen.

The violet eyes favored Eric with a critical glance.

"He's awfully nice looking. Steady?"

"Oh, no. Just a friend of the family." Mary Ellen tried very hard to appear indifferent.

"You ought to come over to the Casino some evening. Swell orchestra. We won the prize last Saturday night. Joe got a wallet and I drew these."

Lolly's hand rose to touch her choker necklace of pinkish pearls as large as marbles.

"Lolly!" gasped Mary Ellen.

"What's the matter?"

"Let me see!" She reached for Lolly's hand with its lacquered nails, the ring on its slim third finger.

"Oh, that——"

"You're engaged!"

"Yes—but don't broadcast the news. I only wear it when I'm not expecting to see anyone I know and then with the stone turned under. It must have slipped."

Mary Ellen admired the small but confident diamond set in a flurry of carved white gold.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Guess," said Lolly her eyes radiant.

"Not—not Joe!"

"Sure, Pop's goin' to throw a couple of fits. Just because Joe's a Portugee. Aren't families the limit?"

"Like him, Lolly?"

"I'm crazy about him." Her voice was low and husky with emotion. A look of fear dimmed the radiance in her eyes. "Honest, I never thought I'd ever love anybody the way I love Joe. I'd die if anything was to break it off."

Lolly in love! No longer gay and impudent. Quieter—fear in her eyes. A shadow light as the tip of a swallow's wing brushed across Mary Ellen's heart. "Does love make you afraid?" she wondered. "You put your happiness in somebody's hand and perhaps the hand is careless. . . ."

"I hope you'll be happy, Lolly," she said aloud.

"Thanks."

"Come out to see me sometime."

"Love to." Lolly was sparkling again. "I'll call you up. And mind! Don't tell all you know. It's a bad idea."

She tossed a smile at Mary Ellen and tripped over closer to Joe, leaving behind a whiff of strong perfume, a vague little troublesome thought.

* * * * * * * *

"I seem to have forgotten something that was important this afternoon," thought Mary Ellen as she stood at the veranda door listening for the last faint splutter of Eric's boat.

But it was not until she had tiptoed past Aunt Ella's door and turned to mount the third floor stairs that she remembered. There was a light in the left hand room at the top of the steps. Lita, the sallow, bossy "Angel Child," must have arrived.

She lay on the bed amid a confusion of frocks and lacy underthings, a bizarre little figure in black silk pajamas strewn with scarlet poppies. One leg was drawn up grasshopper fashion; the other crossed it and a heelless scarlet slipper swung negligently from her toes. Her head against the white heap of pillows

was small and round; her hair, a sleek satin cap peaked over her forehead.

"Why, she's just a child," thought Mary Ellen pausing on the landing where the steps branched right and left. "I wonder if she's homesick."

The illusion was dispelled when Lita turned her head. No homesick tears shimmered on her lashes. Her great dark eyes were calm, faintly amused.

"Hello, Mary Ellen," she drawled in a cool lazy voice. "Come in."

Mary Ellen accepted the invitation. "She's not so scrawny," she thought, "and her eyes are lovely. . . . What beautiful clothes!"

"I started to unpack." Lita waved a languid hand at the drifts of chiffon and lace foaming over the wardrobe trunk, the opened bags and cases, the chest of drawers, the bed. "Frightful mess."

"Let me help you," offered Mary Ellen.

"Don't bother. I'd rather talk. Oh, don't mind that. Sit on it."

The article referred to was the loveliest dancing frock Mary Ellen had ever seen. She lifted it from the bed, smoothed its rumpled folds, slipped it on a hanger.

"Where shall I put it?" she asked.

"Oh, anywhere," said the dancing frock's indifferent mistress. "There aren't any hooks left in there," she added as Mary Ellen opened the closet door.

"No wonder. The way you have things hung up!" exclaimed Mary Ellen as a platinum fox scarf, two hats and a pair of brocade slippers cascaded down on her head. "You'll have to take everything out."

"Don't bother. I want to talk."

Lita's voice indicated that she was accustomed to get what she wanted, and that without delay. But she wasn't condescending, thought Mary Ellen, exploring the depths of the closet for an unoccupied hook. She seemed inclined to be friendly. What an odd looking girl! Not pretty. Her eyes were too large for the slender oval of her face. But she had an air. You knew that she was accustomed to maids and perfumed bath salts and having her own way. A strange occupant for the prim little old-fashioned room. Mary Ellen perched on the edge of the bed.

"Take off your hat," directed Lita.

Mary Ellen removed the leghorn hat, secured a slipping pin.

"Long hair!" observed Lita. "How quaint!"

"Aunt Ella didn't want me to cut it," explained Mary Ellen feeling like a figure from *Gody's Ladies' Book*.

"Good idea. It suits you that way." Lita gazed intently at Mary Ellen through eyes half closed. "You're better looking than you used to be."

"Thank you," Mary Ellen smiled. "I was thinking the same thing about you. As Aunt Ella would say, you've 'plumped up' a bit, haven't you?"

"I was a homely kid," said Lita frankly. "Remember the slate pencil curls? Mother always dressed me like a wax doll. She dotes on ruffles and ribbon bows. I select my own things now and the effect isn't bad."

"Not bad at all," agreed Mary Ellen.

"I'm glad you're here. Somebody young. From

the glimpse I had of the inmates when I arrived this evening I thought it was an old ladies' home."

"Most of the boarders are middle aged, at least. Gray Gables isn't very gay."

"It's better than Aunt Sarah's. That's where Father wanted me to go. Dismal place in the country. The house is a musty old relic filled with family portraits. Miles from anywhere. . . . Have a cigarette?" Lita exerted sufficient energy to reach for a silver box on the table beside her bed.

"No, thank you."

"Against the rules?"

"Oh, no. I just don't like them."

"How quaint!" murmured Lita and coaxed a spurt of flame from an enameled lighter. "Expecting to get a gold watch on your twenty-first birthday?"

"No. It's not that. I've tried them," Mary Ellen admitted. "But I don't like the taste."

"It has to be cultivated. Like olives. These are scented Egyptians. Jerry sent them to remind me of his broken heart. Have some candy." She waved her cigarette at an enormous box of bonbons, smothered in silver paper and loops of satin ribbon.

"Thank you."

"Jerry sends those, too."

"He has good taste," said Mary Ellen.

"But no finesse. As a lover he's a total loss." Lita disposed of the unfortunate Jerry with a careless shrug of her shoulders.

"This is Esmerelda," she said presently and leaning over the side of the bed exhibited a long, limp doll in a bouffant frock of cerise taffeta; an expensive, sophis-

ticated doll with hair of dull gold silk and violet shadows under her drooping eyes.

"She looks like a woman with a past," said Mary Ellen eyeing Esmerelda distastefully.

"She's a love." Lita propped the languid Esmerelda into an upright position. "Did you ever see anything look more utterly bored? She's French and very wicked. I wish she could talk."

"Why, she *is* just a child," thought Mary Ellen. "But she plays with such curious toys. That dreadful doll! It looks as wicked as sin. . . ."

"How do you get a bath?" asked Lita, tiring presently of the doll.

"You swim."

"Well, that's not so bad. What time is breakfast?"

"Until nine."

"Nine! That's practically dawn, isn't it?"

"Goodness no! You'll have to be at art school by then."

"Art school! Oh, I'd forgotten all about it."

"Aren't you going?"

"Maybe. If it's amusing." Lita blew a series of smoke rings through her pursed red lips.

"But I thought—The telegram said ——"

"That I was a budding young artist? Applesauce! Gracie was trying to make an impression."

"Gracie?"

"Mother," said Lita calmly. "She was distracted, poor lamb. There was a deadlock in the family council. This was a compromise."

"Yes?" said Mary Ellen in a polite but faintly bewildered tone.

"They wouldn't take me abroad with them this time because Father's on the verge of a nervous breakdown and the doctor said he mustn't have any excitement. I had to be disposed of somehow. Father's been rabid lately. On account of the orange wig and the chicken house."

"The orange wig and the chicken house!" repeated Mary Ellen more bewildered than ever.

"They have nothing to do with each other. I wore the orange wig when I danced at Mimi Harrold's Venetian party. Of course Father would have to appear at just the wrong moment. He rushed in like the irate parent in a melodrama and dragged me off." She smiled at the memory. "In time he recovered from the tights but he never forgive the orange wig. Anything that color still makes him foam at the mouth. It was a marvelous dance. I'm pretty good, you know. I could get a job on the stage any time, if Father weren't so unreasonable. Mother can always be managed."

Mary Ellen recalled former occasions when Mother had been managed. She wondered idly if Lita still lay on her stomach and screamed.

"The chicken house was a later disturbance," continued Lita after a pause. "We drove Bud Tatnall's car into it and the farmer had us arrested. Our pictures were in all the papers, entirely surrounded by chicken feathers. It was priceless but Father, as usual, failed to be amused. I sometimes suspect he has no sense of humor."

"Gracious!" exclaimed Mary Ellen and thought to herself, "She's showing off. Trying to make an im-

pression." But Lita's voice betrayed neither satisfaction nor regret. She was merely explaining how she happened to be in this prim little room up under the Gray Gables roof.

"So Father said I should go to Aunt Sarah's and I refused. That made things difficult because he had to uphold his authority and there was no way he could do it. This was a compromise. Gracie managed it very cleverly. Pretty soon Father thought it was all his own idea and was grateful to the extent of a sapphire bracelet when I agreed to come. It saved him a lot of trouble. He had to keep his word and he couldn't carry me kicking and screaming to Aunt Sarah's. Aren't parents amusing?" She smiled as though the joke were on Father and crushed out her cigarette.

They talked for a long time while the candles on the dresser burned lower, dripped in waxen cataracts over the tall glass holders. Lita did most of the talking. Mary Ellen curled up at the foot of the bed, her full flowered skirt belling out over the counterpane, listened and marveled, inserted exclamations at appropriate intervals.

Lita was a lady of varied and vast experience. She had been sent home from two schools because of daring escapades. She had crossed the ocean six times. Men had proposed to her. At least one of them was a man, the others, including Jerry, mere unconsidered striplings. She yearned to go on the stage, had privately taken lessons from a professional instructor. Movies bored her. So did college sophomores, in which class the unfortunate Jerry was placed,

and sentimental novels. She thought sometimes of entering a convent. The nun in "The Miracle" was so intriguing. She loathed family dinners and was mad about candied ginger. "Ages ago" when she was "younger" she had been madly in love with a West Point cadet. Paris was thrilling but Venice smelled horribly and didn't Mary Ellen adore French perfume?

Mary Ellen who had never possessed a flask of perfume more exotic than carnation toilet water from the village drug store could not share her raptures. She gazed thoughtfully at the blasé young lady in the black pajamas. Strange that she did not envy Lita. A month ago she would have—when she was lonely and discontented. How long ago that seemed! Like a disturbing dream. She was contented now. It occurred to her that happiness had nothing to do with travel or beautiful clothes. You liked somebody, enjoyed being with him, found pleasure in simple things. That was happiness. . . . "I wouldn't change places with her," she thought, with a warm little glow in her heart. "Not for a trip to Paris or a sapphire bracelet. Eric wouldn't like me if I were that sort of a person. . . ."

"What do you do for amusement?" Lita asked presently.

"I swim—and sail a boat."

"It doesn't sound wildly exciting."

"I like it."

"Is there any place to dance?"

"Oh, yes. The Inn and the Bayview Hotel. The music is best at the Casino but that's a public dance hall."

"I adore them. Any men around?"

"There's Mr. Jackson," suggested Mary Ellen with a smile.

"The gay young blade who met me at the train? Don't you love the way he combs his hair over the bald spot? Any others? Not so juvenile?"

"One or two. You can take your pick."

"I usually do," said Lita serenely.

"I hope you'll like Mayport," said Mary Ellen and wondered how long the experienced Lita would be content to stay.

"The thought that I'm not at Aunt Sarah's will help a lot. But where can I put this stuff?" She surveyed the confusion of garments helplessly.

"If you'll put things away neatly ——"

"Neatly!" moaned Lita. "I haven't the least idea where to start."

"Take everything out of the closet." Mary Ellen rose briskly, prepared to bring order out of chaos.

"How can you be so energetic at this hour of the night?" Lita consulted a tiny platinum watch. "It's after one." She yawned and burrowed her head in the pillows.

"But you can't sleep with all that on the bed."

"Dump it off." Lita kicked lazily at a pile of lacy underthings. They spilled over the edge of the bed, drifted like petals into a heap on the floor.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mary Ellen. "They're so pretty! I'll put them in the drawer."

"You're a darling," drawled Lita, "and a very precious lamb."

Mary Ellen sat cross-legged on the floor, folded the

dainty garments into the bottom drawer of the mahogany chest. Her fingers caressed the filmy trifles. She loved their silken softness, their delicate perfume. Perhaps she would have underthings like that . . . sometime. . . . "The orchid ones, please, and the apricot negligée. . . . Charge them to Mrs. Swann." . . . Her eyes drooped sleepily. Fragments of thought slipped through her mind. . . . What an odd looking girl! Not pretty. Friendly. Amusing too. Showing off. . . . Supper on the terrace. . . . Eric's voice . . . "You look sweet" . . . "Darling!" . . . Lolly in love with Joe Bandarra, the shadow of fear in her eyes. . . . "You put your happiness in somebody's hand and perhaps the hand is careless." . . . The waltz song they played at the movies. . . . "I wonder if I keep on praying" . . . What was the rest of it? . . . The fat man who went to sleep with his mouth open. . . . Funny. . . . Her hand in Eric's. . . . Happy. . . . So happy. . . .

The wind rustled the pages of a magazine. Mary Ellen roused with a start. How long had she been sitting there cross-legged on the floor, dreaming—lost in thought? What would Lita think?

But she need not have worried for Lita was fast asleep.

VIII

LITA proved a diverting addition to the Gray Gables household. She was capricious and amusing, a lady of many moods. She constantly posed to shock the rocking-chair fleet and attract the gentlemen. Her clothes, her manners, her startling conversation were discussed at great length. With Mary Ellen, she did not pose. She liked her, was impressed by Eric and the romantic atmosphere of Tarpaper Palace. Mary Ellen frequently suspected that she was showing off and did not hesitate to call her to account.

"You've never danced with the Prince of Wales in your life, Lita Wetherill," she said as they lay one evening on Mary Ellen's bed because Lita's was, as usual, snowed under with garments.

"What if I haven't? It made a good story," drawled Lita.

"And I don't believe you ever saw the inside of a Chinese opium den."

"Of course I have."

"Where?"

"In the movies."

"Oh—that! Why do you tell such frightful fibs?"

"It's amusing." Lita smiled at the candle-light shadows on the ceiling. "The boarders love it. Mrs. Smithers is going to pop some day."

"Why do you like to shock people?"

"Good for them. Old mossbacks!"

"But, Lita," protested Mary Ellen, "it doesn't get you anything."

"Lots of attention."

"It gives them the wrong impression."

"How should I act, Grandmother? Learn to do tatting and play croquet?"

"Just be yourself."

"But I am. I'm like that—temperamental."

"Applesauce!"

Lita propped her head on her hand and pouted at Mary Ellen.

"Don't you like me?" she asked plaintively.

"Of course." Mary Ellen smiled. Lita could be very engaging when she chose.

"Then don't scold. You sound like Aunt Sarah. Have a caramel and stop trying to be a good influence."

She described, then, Miss Lillie Belle's latest coy conversation with Mr. Jackson. Her voice, her gestures were so like the best efforts of the lady from Kansas City that Mary Ellen forgot to disapprove and laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Yes, Lita was diverting. It was fun to have her there. She never intruded, seldom accepted an invitation to sail or swim with Mary Ellen and Eric. She thought he was handsome but too quiet and called him "the Melancholy Dane." Eric did not attempt to amuse her with his nonsense. "She's too grown up," he often remarked. "I can't talk to women of the world." So nothing was changed after all. Mary Ellen continued to spend her afternoons and a great many evenings with Eric, happy that they might be alone, that there was no third person to be considered.

Lita went faithfully to art school. At least, she disappeared for a number of hours each day and returned

late in the afternoon with paint on her fingers, smudgy squares of beaver board under her arm.

The number of her admirers rapidly increased. She trailed home with a new victim almost every day, art school students, young gentlemen from the neighboring hotels. She treated them with a sort of amused indifference which fanned their ardor and brought them in swarms to the Gray Gables veranda. Then Jerry of the dubious charm and broken heart arrived in Mayport and established himself at a hotel for the rest of the summer. He was big and solidly built with nice eyes and a friendly smile. There was nothing subtle about Jerry. He obviously adored Lita and knew no art to conceal the state of his feelings. She granted him audience when there was no one more amusing to divert her ladyship.

So Lita was well squired and seemed contented. She set off for art school every morning, late but in the best of spirits.

"What a girl!" thought Mary Ellen as she watched her out of sight one sunny morning. "She isn't half as grown up as she likes to have people think. It's just another of her poses. She'd skip now, if she thought no one was watching. Just because it's a beautiful day and that scarlet tam is becoming. I'd skip no matter how many people watched. It must be very hard to remember to pose."

"Lita seems to like art school," she said to Aunt Ella.

"Thank goodness," answered Aunt Ella. "It keeps her out of mischief most of the day."

But there came a time when Mary Ellen was led to

wonder how many hours Lita spent in the studio beyond the curve of the road. She walked down to the corner one morning to take the bus into town. There was Lita sitting on the Green Lantern Terrace, eating toast and raspberry jam. Mary Ellen climbed the terrace steps.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" she asked in what she hoped was a voice of reproof.

"Eating raspberry jam," drawled Lita. "Have some. It's delicious."

"Shouldn't you be at the studio?"

"If one did all the things one should!" Lita shrugged an eloquent shoulder. "Besides I was starved. You can't paint on an empty stomach."

"Why don't you get up for breakfast?"

"I try. Really, I do."

"You roll over and go to sleep again when I knock on the door," accused Mary Ellen.

"It's a habit I can't seem to overcome. Please sit down and be pleasant."

Mary Ellen shook her head.

"I'm going in town and the bus is due any minute."

"I'll go with you," Lita announced, her voice inelegantly full.

"Aren't you going to the studio at all?"

"Not to-day. Somebody's painting fish. The smell makes me ill."

"Don't you ever go?"

"Once in a while. Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Only then? What do you do other days?"

"Fool around." Lita's voice hinted at mysterious adventures.

"Doesn't Miss Baynard wonder where you are?"

"Not now. She's accustomed to it. Besides, why should she worry? Father pays the bill. Here comes the bus!" she exclaimed as that equipage lumbered around the corner. She snatched off her smock, left it a crumpled heap on the chair, her paint box and easel on the grass beside the table.

"Are you going to leave these?" asked Mary Ellen, indicating the discarded paraphernalia.

"Somebody will take care of them," Lita called back over her shoulder. "Somebody always does."

They climbed into the bus, settled on the back seat, clutched each other as the ancient vehicle lunged into motion. Lita drew a long breath, turned toward the window in quest of new adventures.

"This is more fun than making marigolds to bloom on beaver board," she observed as the bus rattled over the causeway and ploughed a determined furrow through the narrow, crowded street.

"You're as changeable as April weather," said Mary Ellen feeling that she should be severe but pleased to have company in town.

"Why not? Who wants to feel always the same about anything?"

"I do," thought Mary Ellen. "I want always to feel happy, the way I feel now. I want always to wake up in the morning glad because it's another day, loving the sun and the wind and—Eric. . . ."

Aloud she said:

"Perhaps you'll change your mind some day, Lita."

But Lita did not answer. She sat gazing off into

space through eyes half closed, a mysterious smile on her lips. It was not difficult to account for the change. Lita was posing to impress the gentleman across the aisle.

They left the bus at the post-office square, a pleasant place of grass and shady elm trees. In the center of the square upon his granite pedestal stood the bronze soldier who looked like Eric. Mary Ellen kissed her hand at him when Lita was looking the other way. They wandered through the stores, bought embroidery floss for the dress Mary Ellen was making and a bathing cap for Lita. They had sodas at the drug store and walked down the main street toward the end of town eating cherries from a paper bag. Lita had no occasion to pose. There were no observing gentlemen to be impressed. She devoured cherries like a greedy little girl, admired the shop window full of wooden animals, rushed in to buy a spotted cow for the youngest Peterson. They found a great many things to amuse them; the ornate gilded chairs in the bootblack shop, a green velvet toque in the milliner's window, a balloon man with a cluster of swaying, painted bubbles. They chattered happily, pleased because the sky was blue and life a gay adventure.

"What on earth is that?" asked Lita suddenly.

"Where?"

"On the hill. It looks like an enormous pink birthday cake."

"Oh, that's where the Bandarras live."

"What a gaudy place. Is it supposed to be Spanish?"

"They're Portuguese," Mary Ellen explained.

" The father owns a number of fishing boats and bosses the Portuguese colony. He has lots of money. People say he uses some of his boats to run rum. He's been caught a couple of times."

" Rum running! " Lita exclaimed. " Let's look at the house."

They climbed the hill and viewed the Bandarra mansion at close range. It was an ornate building with lacy wrought iron balconies beneath the windows, an incongruous but imposing porte-cochère. Beds of tiger lilies, of gladioli and cannas fought with the mellow pink tint of the walls. The driveway was bordered with catalpa trees trimmed into green umbrellas. A fountain with a dispirited Cupid graced the lawn. There were dwarf pines and Norway maples, statues fashioned from gray-white marble. Around the estate, as a crowning touch of elegance, ran a high grilled iron fence embellished with gilded spear heads in a bristling row along the top.

" Hideous! " Lita observed.

" It doesn't match the rest of Mayport," said Mary Ellen. " It looks like a fat woman in a pink dress trimmed with black lace, a common sort of woman who tries very hard to be a lady."

" It does," Lita smiled. " What sort of people live there? "

Mary Ellen told her about the handsome, quarreling Bandarras; the father who ruled the Portuguese colony with a hand of iron; the peasant mother, bewildered at unaccustomed magnificence, ill at east in her jewels and furs; about Dolores, the beauty of the family, who eloped with Barbara's cousin, Webster Sanborn, and

left him because the well ordered life of the Mayport aristocrats proved dull; about Manuel, Leo and Joe, dark-eyed, lazy and reckless; about little Nina who went to a convent school and wanted to be a nun. Lita was interested.

"Let's call on them," she suggested.

"Heavens! What for?"

"They sound interesting."

"I like Nina," said Mary Ellen briefly. "The rest of them are dreadful. They aren't the kind of people you call on, Lita." She was silent for a moment, thinking about Lolly, wondering if Lolly would be happy when she had married Joe and lived with the Bandarra tribe. Lovely Lolly with the look of fear in long-lashed violet eyes. . . .

"Where do the fishermen live?" Lita asked presently.

"Near the dock at the bottom of the hill. Shall we walk down that way?"

"I'd like to," said Lita. "It's perfectly fascinating."

They wandered along the narrow street lined with brightly painted houses. Plaster saints in robes of scarlet and blue stood between draped lace curtains in the windows. Here and there in a sunny doorway sat an old woman with a shawl over her head, heavy rings in her ears, an expression of old world patience in her eyes.

"The young people wear American clothes," Mary Ellen explained. "But the old folks cling to their earrings and shawls."

"It's like Italy or Spain," marveled Lita the trav-

eled. "See, they have strings of peppers against the walls, and goats!"

"There's the Portuguese church." Mary Ellen pointed to a square building with a tower on a hill above the harbor. In a niche over the doorway stood an enormous statue of the Virgin, holding a ship in her hands. "You can see the statue far down the harbor at night when her halo is lighted," Mary Ellen explained. "They call her 'Our Lady of the Good Voyage.' The sailors burn candles to her when they return from a trip."

"Can we go there to church sometime?" asked Lita.

"If you like. The chimes are in the belfry. You heard them the other night."

"They gave me the blues. I felt like a miserable sinner," Lita confessed.

"I like them," said Mary Ellen, "but they make me cry."

"Next time we'll sob together," Lita suggested. "I hate to feel like a sinner alone. Listen!" she broke off suddenly. "An accordion! It's playing 'The Prisoner's Song'!"

"On the dock probably."

"Come on!" Lita's scarlet slippers bore her swiftly toward the music. "I love accordions!"

A boat lay at anchor beside the dock, a weather-beaten schooner cluttered and none too clean, *The Five Brothers,* a venerable fishing packet. Its furled sails were dingy gray, its rail scored and scarred. It smelled of fish and onions, of burned grease and tarry brine-soaked rope. Sailors in high rubber boots, faded jerseys, flannel shirts brightly checked, sprawled about

on the deck, munching great chunks of bread and cheese, shouting to each other in Portuguese, singing, joking, a boisterous dark-skinned crew. In the center of the group sat an old man with a red bandanna knotted about his throat, and rings of gold in his ears. His face was as brown and as wrinkled as a withered apple; his eyes, jetty black, bright as shoe buttons, gleaming beneath grizzled brows. He was playing a gaudy red and scarlet accordion with gilt keys that sparkled in the sunlight. His shoulders swayed in time to the music and he smiled as he played, a grotesque toothless smile.

"They look like pirates," said Lita poised on the edge of the dock. "If only they had cutlasses and a wooden leg or two." Her eyes straying over the dirty, picturesque group, gleamed with sudden interest. "Who is that—the young one?" she asked.

"That's Joe Bandarra," answered Mary Ellen.

"He's good looking. Do you know him?"

"We were in high school together."

"Then he's just a mere boy," said Lita with a note of disappointment in her voice.

"He's older than I am. Joe spent a number of years in high school. He was sort of a perennial senior."

"Oh," said Lita and glanced with new interest at the bronzed young foreigner leaning against the mast of *The Five Brothers*. "Why doesn't he look this way? He's handsome, isn't he?"

As though he had heard and wished to be obliging, Joe Bandarra turned his lustrous black eyes in their direction. He waved a greeting at Mary Ellen and vaulted across the rail of *The Five Brothers*.

"Hello, Mary Ellen," he said advancing to meet them. "How's the girl?"

"Fine, thank you. How are you?" Mary Ellen answered a bit stiffly.

"Able to get around." He smiled at Mary Ellen but his eyes strayed toward Lita. "Slumming?"

"Just taking a walk," explained Mary Ellen and then because there seemed no way out of it, she introduced Joe to Lita.

He took the hand she indolently extended.

"Glad to know you," said Joe's voice while his eyes smiling into hers seemed to add, "Where have you been all my life?"

"How do you do," sang Lita's voice while her eyes answered, "Now that you've found me, let's not waste any time."

"It's a lovely day," said Mary Ellen merely to break the queer tingling silence. She wished Joe would let go of Lita's hand, stop looking at her in that curious fashion.

Lita withdrew her hand after a moment, recovered her pose of lazy indifference.

"Is that the only tune he knows?" she asked indicating the one-man orchestra on the schooner.

"Don't you like it?"

"Too pathetic. I'm about to burst into tears."

"What would you like?" Joe's manner indicated that he lived only to serve her.

"Something lively."

He spoke to the musician in Portuguese. The old man nodded his head, grinned, coaxed from the accordion a lilting dance tune.

"That better?"

"Much," answered Lita swaying to the rhythm of the music.

"Want to dance?"

"Always."

"Come to papa."

He held out his arms and she drifted into them. They moved over the dock in perfect accord while the sailors stopped eating to watch and Mary Ellen thought with a little gasp of dismay, "I wish they wouldn't! Not out here!"

"Great!" Joe exclaimed when the music stopped. "You're a smooth dancer."

"Thank you," said Lita, her cheeks warmly flushed, an unaccustomed sparkle in her eyes. "You're not so bad yourself."

"Tango?" he asked.

"I learned the steps in kindergarten," Lita answered coolly.

Again Joe spoke in Portuguese to the old accordion player. He responded with a tango and presently they were dancing to the smooth languid rhythm, weaving a pattern of intricate steps on the worn planking of the dock.

Mary Ellen forgot to disapprove. She settled down on the dock, leaned against a piling, gazed intently at the dancers. How graceful they were! Lovely to watch! Lita's scarlet slippers followed the intricate steps with faultless ease. She smiled into Joe's caressing dark eyes, whirled away from him and back into his arms, her body as pliant as a birch tree bending in the wind. His eyes never strayed from the slender

oval of her face, caressed her throat, her lips, her brow. Mary Ellen stirred uneasily. "You'd suppose he was in love with her," she thought. "He looks at every girl that way. But I wish we hadn't come."

"Great!" said Joe when at last he released Lita from his arms. "Nobody around here can dance a tango like that. Going to stay for a while?"

"Until September." Lita's voice was cool but Mary Ellen noticed that the scarlet 'kerchief around her throat stirred with her quickened breathing.

"Fine!" said Joe bending toward her. "We'll dance again?"

"Perhaps." She slipped her arm through Mary Ellen's, turned toward the street. But Mary Ellen, vaguely alarmed, knew that Joe's eyes had asked a question and Lita's eyes had answered.

Lita was strangely quiet on the way back home in the bus.

"Did you like Joe?" Mary Ellen asked.

"What?" She roused with a genuine start. "Oh, he's all right," she answered and turned toward the window.

A little later she turned languidly, remarked in her cool, lazy voice:

"He's a marvelous dancer. I suppose he's the village sheik. Thinks pretty well of himself. God's gift to women."

"Something like that," answered Mary Ellen.

For the rest of the trip Lita was silent, wrapped in her cloak of indifference, her hands folded tranquilly in her lap. Mary Ellen thought she was posing to impress the boy in the seat behind them. But she was

mistaken. Lita, for once, was actually lost in thought, totally unconscious of admiring eyes.

* * * * * * * *

"You're quiet, Mary Ellen," said Eric as they sat that evening on the wooden steps at the edge of the lawn.

"I'm thinking."

"About me?"

She shook her head.

"I'm hurt. What are you thinking?"

"About Lita."

"You always are. You haven't paid any attention to me since she came."

"Oh, Eric!"

"I'd like to have all your thoughts."

"Selfish!" She nestled against his arm.

"Where is her ladyship?"

"On the kitchen porch alone. She sent Jerry home an hour ago."

"Listen! Is that music?"

"It's Lita's uke," answered Mary Ellen. "And she's humming."

"Well, it's a horrible sound. Can't we do anything about it?"

But Mary Ellen did not answer. Again a vague whisper of uneasiness stirred in her heart, again she wished that they had not visited the Portuguese dock that morning, for Lita was humming and idly strumming the tango tune to which she had danced with Joe Bandarra.

IX

"Sometimes I'm happy,
Sometimes I'm blue.
My disposition
Depends on you,"

sang Ruby and flicked a duster over the more conspicuous portions of the living-room furniture.

Mary Ellen was tidying the desk. She continued to burrow through cluttered pigeonholes and made no comment on the music.

"That's a swell piece, Mary Ellen," said Ruby presently. "We heard it in at Twilby's and George bought me the record. Of course we haven't a Victrola but we might have sometime. George is the limit that way. I get real put out at him. The other night he brought me a lamp shade, one of those shirred silk ones with gold fringe. It's real handsome, if only we had a lamp to put it on. I'm expectin' him to lug in a spare tire most any day on the chance we'll sometime have a car of our own. Aren't men the darndest?" Ruby's voice thrilled with affectionate pride. "Just like kids. If they've got a nickel in their pockets they want to buy the gaudiest thing in sight."

Mary Ellen smiled absently and turned the leaves of the desk calendar, a businesslike arrangement on a metal standard with a square white leaf and an enormous black number for every day.

"Sometimes you're almost breakin' my heart," caroled Ruby cheerfully but a bit off key. "We're

goin' to spend Sunday with George's folks over at Wareham," she continued. " I'm sort of nervous. You know how it is, meetin' his sisters and all. Mom wants me to wear my blue taffeta but I think that's too plain lookin'. The pink voile has more style only I spilled coffee down the front. Still I could use the scarf the Queen of Sheba gave me that she burned a hole in the end of. I mended it so you wouldn't notice."

Mary Ellen made no reply. She turned the leaves of the calendar, her eyes on a photograph of Great Uncle Eben Hollis hanging above the desk.

" Say, what's on your mind? " Ruby asked.

Mary Ellen's eyes strayed from the photograph, rested inquiringly upon Ruby.

" What did you say? "

" I said, what's on your mind? You're sittin' there like you was in a daze."

" Oh," said Mary Ellen, " I was thinking that to-day is the thirteenth of August."

" For land sake! " shrilled Ruby. " Is that all? "

" But it is the thirteenth of August," Mary Ellen repeated pointing to the number on the square white calendar sheet.

" Well, that's not surprisin' seein' as how yesterday was the twelfth and to-morrow's likely to be the fourteenth. I shouldn't think a girl as smart as you would be so pleased to discover that."

" I'm not pleased," said Mary Ellen. " Just surprised, that's all."

" You're a queer one." Ruby shook her head. " Seems as though with all the newspapers around this house you ought to be able to keep track of the date.

Goodness, I forgot all about the pie apples! Mis' Basset'll have a fit." And she scurried out toward the kitchen, her duster tucked under her arm.

The thirteenth of August! Mary Ellen gazed pensively at the calendar. It didn't seem possible! How quickly the days had passed! Summer would soon be over. What then? School and chalk dust, bad boys and the balky stove; long evenings in the Gray Gables living-room correcting smudgy spelling papers while Grandfather dozed beside the fire and Aunt Molly knit sweaters for countless small relatives. What a change from this beautiful summer! Eric. . . . Where would he be? She had no idea. He never spoke of the future. Perhaps he would stay until cold weather. That would be fun. Mayport was lovely in the autumn when fuzzy asters nodded against the fence and the air tasted like cider.

She pictured them walking to the lighthouse beneath a flaming arch of crimson and bronze and gold; sitting before the fireplace in Tarpaper Palace. The passing of summer would not make her sad if Eric should chance to stay. Perhaps he would never leave her! The vague sadness stealing into her heart drifted away. She was happy because the present was near, the uncertain future, in spite of the date on the calendar, comfortably far away. It was hard to think of winter when the air was mild, the border of phlox beneath the window a riot of purple and warm cerise; when bathing suits hung on the clothes-line and boys peddling blueberries knocked at the kitchen door. Mary Ellen resolved to let the future take care of itself, to enjoy the days that were left.

She turned the leaves of the calendar back to June the twenty-eighth. That was the day she had popped her head through the window of Tarpaper Palace and discovered Eric. It should be marked with a golden star as Aunt Ella, a very long time ago, used to paste a gold-paper star over the date on the calendar when Mary Ellen had been good all day. She smiled, remembering how proud she had been of those good conduct marks. If there were a sufficient number of them it meant a new sled or a squirrel muff for Christmas. Usually there had been a great many unadorned squares during the summer months but November and December resembled the sky on a cloudless night. Strange how the impressions of childhood persisted. Mary Ellen still felt that happy days should be especially marked.

She would need a great many stars to mark the happy days this summer: one for the fourth of July when they had watched the fireworks across the harbor, one for the discovery of the bronze kettle and the rooster-head toasting fork; a whole constellation for the night they had been caught in the storm at the lighthouse and found shelter on the veranda beyond the friendly green gate. One star, no matter how brilliant, would not be enough for that was the night that Eric first had kissed her. She turned the leaves slowly, remembering the events of each day. No incident, however trivial, was unimportant. She recalled them all. This was the day they walked to the village and Eric helped her select the material and pattern for a new dress. Two dreary starless days when Aunt Ella burned her wrist and Mary Ellen had been obliged to

help with the cooking. July the twenty-sixth! That was the day they had found the cave in the rocks on the point. Eric had made her a crown of shells and seaweed, had told her the story of a mermaid who bobbed her hair.

A star for supper on the terrace, for the war movie with its haunting waltz tune, for Lita of the scarlet slippers. . . . This was the day she and Lita had visited the Portuguese colony and Lita had danced on the dock with Joe Bandarra. How silly she had been to worry about it. Lita had never mentioned him since. That evening Eric sat with her on the wooden steps. . . . Many stars for the wooden steps, the shadow-screened steps at the edge of the lawn. . . . August the sixth! That was the day Eric had sat beside her while she lay in the hammock all afternoon, had read bits from "Alice in Wonderland" to make her forget the ache of a twisted ankle. It had been almost pleasant to be hurt. . . . A star for the day they sailed with Grandfather; for the rainy afternoon with Lita and Jerry on the island. . . . Happy, happy days, thought Mary Ellen, and held the calendar against her heart as though she wished to gather and keep every moment of the whole lovely summer.

Mary Ellen turned the August the thirteenth leaf and peeped at the next one. She wondered if to-morrow would be marked with a golden star. Probably. Every day with Eric was a beautiful adventure. A thrill of expectancy banished the last lingering shadow of sadness. She placed the calendar on the desk and skipped upstairs to change her dress for dinner, singing, as she bounded up two steps at a time, Ruby's favorite song:

"Sometimes I'm happy,
Sometimes I'm blue.
My disposition
Depends on you."

"My stars, what a racket!" snapped Mrs. Smithers behind her closed door. "Girls these days have no consideration for anybody!" and she held her hands over her ears to shut out the sound of Mary Ellen's singing.

"Mercy! Mamma taught me never to raise my voice," mused Miss Lillie Belle behind her door. "But she does sound happy. Sometimes I wish ——" She sighed wistfully, added a petal to the cluster of dahlias blooming upon her canvas.

"La la! Just hear her!" chuckled Madame Cavella behind the third closed door. "Oh, to be young again and slim and in love!" She passed one hand over her three plump chins and with the other reached for a bar of nougat stuffed with nuts and bits of candied cherry.

"Hey there! Feeling your oats?" called Lita from the door that never was closed. "Why not give the robins a chance?"

"I'm happy!" exclaimed Mary Ellen pirouetting on the landing of the third-floor stairs. "If I don't sing, I shall most inelegantly bust."

* * * * * * * *

But the next day was destined not to be marked with a golden star though it dawned as fair and as shining as heart could wish.

"It would be a real pleasure to get to church again,"

said Aunt Ella as she washed the breakfast dishes, her arms plunged to her elbows in a pan of hot sudsy water.

"We're regular heathen in the summer time," said Aunt Molly who was helping Mary Ellen to dry the dishes because Ruby had gone to spend the day with George's folks over in Wareham. "The bells sound real pretty."

"Well, why don't you go?" suggested Mary Ellen.

"I don't see how we could," objected Aunt Ella. "The meat is ready but there's the potatoes and beans."

"I'll do them," offered Mary Ellen, her heart chiming in tune with the music of the bells drifting through the kitchen windows.

"The girl that's visiting Millie Loomis is going to sing a solo. I read it in the paper. They say she has a nice voice. Sings in a church in Boston," said Aunt Molly wistfully.

"You can go. I'll look after things."

"Well, Molly, you might. The Perkins will be glad to drive you in their car." Aunt Ella's voice was cheerful but Mary Ellen detected a longing note.

"Both of you go. I can manage as well as not." And she thought, "They have so few pleasures, poor dears! If they enjoy watching the Rev. Mr. Whittaker's goatee bob up and down they ought to go." But she knew that the Rev. Mr. Whittaker was not the sole attraction. Going to church meant putting on best clothes and seeing people. Then, too, there was the soloist from Boston. "I won't mind a bit, darling," she coaxed slipping her arm around Aunt Ella's waist.

"If Ruby was here it wouldn't be so bad," objected Aunt Ella but Mary Ellen knew that she was weakening.

"We'll finish the dishes," she said briskly. "And while you're dressing I'll call Mr. Perkins. You'll be back by quarter after twelve and dinner isn't until one. If Mrs. Smithers starts to fidget, I'll feed her paregoric."

"You're a dear child, Mary Ellen," said Aunt Molly. "Goodness! I wonder if my voile needs pressing!"

Aunt Ella said nothing but the smile she flashed at Mary Ellen would have repaid her for paring enough potatoes to feed all of Mayport.

And presently Aunt Molly in her lavender voile and the hat with the violets, her white silk gloves yellowed from many washings and her jet bag containing a handkerchief sprinkled with toilet water, a quarter for collection and a sack of peppermints in case she should happen to get a coughing spell, was waiting at the gate for the Perkins' flivver. Aunt Ella who had worked up to the last minute and was obliged to hook her dress on the way downstairs, rushed into the kitchen for last minute instructions.

"Dish up some currant jam, Mary Ellen."

"I will, darling. Your hat isn't on straight." She adjusted the black chip hat with its cluster of glass cherries no more brilliant or glossy than Aunt Ella's cheeks.

"Just pare the potatoes I've set out. Am I hooked right? Seems as though I'm just thrown together."

"You're a raving beauty," said Mary Ellen and

thought how odd Aunt Ella looked without an apron. The striped summer silk didn't fit very well. Miss Tillie, the village dressmaker, had done her worst. But Aunt Ella was oblivious to the fit of sleeve and placket.

"Put on the beans at eleven. Jed Trott says they're tender but I don't trust him after those beets. I've forgotten a handkerchief! No, here it is tucked up my sleeve."

"Hurry, Aunt Ella. There's the car."

"My stars! I know I'll come to pieces somewhere!" and Aunt Ella hurried off patting at her back hair.

The Perkins' flivver bore them away pleased and expectant on the back seat. Mary Ellen took the basket of potatoes out on the kitchen porch, settled into the chair with the broken rocker. The kitchen porch, being on the side, commanded a view of the front walk as well as the lawn in the rear. It was a pleasant place to work. She glanced around while the paring-knife lay idle in her lap, the basket of potatoes waited beside her on the porch. Lovely day! The air was mild, blossom-scented, golden with sunlight. A frisky breeze tilted the sails on the bay, set to swinging the Canterbury bells in the border along the fence. Mary Ellen kissed the tips of her fingers to the beautiful day and the day, deceitful jade, smiled back nor hinted of the cloud which hovered in the distance, waiting to dim the shining of Mary Ellen's eyes, to hush the singing in her heart.

Miss Lillie Belle fluttered off to church in her flowered georgette, hopefully shortened. Mr. Jackson, brushed and debonair, a pink in his buttonhole, a bor-

dered handkerchief peeping out of his breast-pocket attended her, carried her ruffled parasol.

"I wonder how much of the sermon she'll hear," thought Mary Ellen and set to work on the potatoes.

Lita presently sauntered down the walk. She wore a sleek little black satin frock with a white collar which tried very hard to appear demure. A snug hat of soft black felt with a single crystal ornament eclipsed one eye and threatened the other. She carried the platinum fur scarf across her arm, and was slipping her fingers into spotless white gloves.

"Hello there," called Mary Ellen. "You look like a widow."

"I'm going to church," Lita announced pausing in the path.

"It seems to be fashionable this morning. Shall you honor the Baptist or the Congregational flock?"

"I thought I'd like to see what that quaint little Portuguese church looks like inside." Lita drew a vanity case from her black suede bag, and deepened the crimson of her lips.

"Oh," said Mary Ellen. "I'm sorry I can't go with you but the boarders must have potatoes even on Sunday."

"I'll find the way. There's a bus in a few minutes." She added a dusting of powder to her nose and languidly studied the effect. "Jerry wants to take us to the beach this afternoon."

"That's nice." Mary Ellen's eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"Jerry's a tiresome old dear," drawled Lita, "but his car is certainly more comfortable than the bus."

"Jerry is nice," protested Mary Ellen. "You treat him frightfully."

Lita shrugged an arrogant shoulder.

"He seems to like it. Always comes back for more. 'The Melancholy Dane' will accompany us, I suppose?"

"Eric?" asked Mary Ellen just for the fun of saying his name though she knew very well whom Lita meant.

"Mary's little lamb," teased Lita. "Mary's little giraffe would be more appropriate. It gives me a crick in my neck to look up at him."

"Then don't bother."

"Jealous?"

"Silly! Of course not."

"Like him?"

"Heaps."

"These strong silent men don't appeal to me. I like them a bit more lively."

"I'm satisfied." A wild rose flush tinged Mary Ellen's cheeks, crept up to the edge of her hair.

"Don't be cross." Lita smiled. "I like him too though he does treat me like a mere child and a rather irritating one at that. Shall I burn a candle to St. Catherine for you?"

"Half a dozen. You'd better hurry or you'll miss your bus."

"I told the driver last night that I would ride with him at ten-thirty this morning. He'll wait." Lita strolled in leisurely fashion down the front walk, leaving in the air a lingering breath of her faint, exotic perfume.

Mary Ellen's finger wielded the paring knife swiftly while her brows knitted in a thoughtful frown. Why should Lita, the languid, get up in time for church? And the Portuguese church! It occurred to her that perhaps Lita had not forgotten her dance with Joe Bandarra. A whisper of uneasiness stirred in her heart; uneasiness for Lita who beneath her veneer of sophistication was only a child, for Lolly who was engaged to Joe Bandarra. A fragment of Lolly's conversation in the lobby of the movie house recurred to her. . . . "I'm crazy about him. I'd die if anything was to break it off." . . . The hint of fear in her eyes. . . . A cloud of depression settled about her. She banished it with a laugh. Silly! As though Lita would fall in love with a Portugee, be he ever so handsome; Lita who had gone to finishing school and never wore stockings with even the tiniest darn, Lita who was fastidious to a fault. She smiled at her own fantastic imagination, hummed a cheerful song.

"Sing Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Sing Hallelujah all the day. . . ."

Why would people eat potatoes? No matter how many she pared it seemed to make no impression on the basket. She hoped Aunt Ella was having a nice time in church, that the Boston girl's voice would not disappoint Aunt Molly. She wondered if Ruby in her pink voile and Lita's discarded scarf was making a favorable impression on George's folks. Dear Ruby! She had so little and was cheerful in spite of it all. Life was not pleasant for a great many people. Mary

Ellen sighed. She was happy. She wanted everybody in the world to share her happiness. But in the distance beyond the gaze of her sparkling eyes, beyond the borderland of sweet content hovered the cloud that was black as lamp-soot. . . .

Madame Cavella presently walked around to the kitchen porch. She insisted upon helping with the potatoes. Mary Ellen tied an apron about the ex-prima donna's expansive waist, gave her a pan and a knife. In due time the beans were dancing about in a pot on the stove and the potatoes were keeping them company. When the aunts returned from church everything was as right as possible and the dinner-bell rang before even Mrs. Smithers thought of fidgeting.

After dinner Eric came in his bathing suit and sweater. Mary Ellen sat with him on the grass beneath the Tree of Heaven waiting for Jerry. Lita, briefly but effectively clad in a scarlet jersey, sauntered across the lawn to join them while the occupants of the veranda rockers buzzed their disapproval. Presently Jerry's car halted at the gate and they crowded in. It was a tight fit. Mary Ellen sat between Jerry and Eric. Lita perched on the folded back top, entirely surrounded by the paraphernalia necessary to insure her Ladyship a comfortable afternoon at the beach. The sparkling air went like wine to their heads, loosened their tongues. Lita forgot to be haughty. She shrieked when the car swooped around corners, clutched at Jerry's tousled hair, waved at pedestrians who paused to stare. She composed a song to tease Mary Ellen and was so delighted with it that she sang the silly words over and over:

"Mary had a big giraffe
His neck was long and thin
And everywhere the creature went
Sweet Mary followed him!"

Mary Ellen cuddled close to Eric, her cheeks pink with excitement, her long fair braids whipping across her shoulders. She was too happy to mind the silly song.

"Hello, Sparkly!" Eric whispered under cover of the singing.

"Hello, Handsome!" She smiled up at him, her eyes shining.

"Happy?"

"I'm about to explode like a firecracker and fly in all directions."

"Sounds dreadful."

"Lovely feeling! All fizzy!"

"What causes it? I'd like to feel that way."

"Oh, the sun ——"

"Is that all?"

"And the wind. It tastes like champagne sounds."

"Anything else?"

"You," she whispered to the sleeve of his sweater.

"Darling!" He found her hand, imprisoned it firmly. "Hook with champagne! I'd much rather watch you fizz."

Jerry's roadster sped up hill and down, through the village, across the mile-wide stretch of moor to Half Moon Beach. There it nosed into a vacant place in the line of cars, subsided with a gentle heaving of its motor. They scrambled out. Lita and Mary Ellen tripped down the flight of steps to the sand, Jerry and Eric, bur-

dened with the paraphernalia, followed. The red and white umbrella was erected and they lounged about in its shade, eating chocolates, talking, laughing at the absurd people always in evidence on Sunday at the beach.

Jerry presently coaxed Lita to swim. They ran down to the curling edge of the water, tested its temperature with cringing toes, dropped down on the sand to wait for courage.

"Want to go in?" Mary Ellen asked.

"Br-r-r!" shivered Eric. "If it's too cold for Jerry I beg to be excused."

"He's nice, isn't he?"

"Jerry? Fine chap."

"Lita treats him frightfully."

"She ought to be thoroughly spanked."

"Don't you like Lita, Eric?"

"I like you," he answered. "Unfasten your hair."

Mary Ellen loosened the shining skeins. They fell about her like a cloak of pale gold silk.

"You're gorgeous that way." He lifted a silky strand, pulled it through his fingers. "Hair is an inadequate word. The French is no better, and the German is even worse. I shall spend the rest of my life acquiring new languages, Chinese and Hebrew and Russian and Greek to see if I can find a word to suggest the beauty of your hair."

"Silly!" murmured Mary Ellen and loved it.

"You look like a princess in a fairy tale. I'd like to pick you up and run away with you."

"Well, why don't you? I'm not so heavy." The flush in her cheeks deepened from pink to rose.

"I couldn't run far enough," he answered. "I'd

like to carry you off to some lovely uninhabited land beyond the rim of the world where there would be nothing to remind us of a previous existence, no calendars or newspapers, no slippers with glittering heels, no gray velvet hats in shop windows, no squirrel fur coats on blonde stenographers, no violets in flower venders' trays."

"Do you hate all those things, Eric?" asked Mary Ellen, bewildered and a bit alarmed.

He laughed. It was not an altogether successful laugh but it released the tense line of his lips and softened his eyes.

"No, of course not. I'm raving as usual. How do you stand me, Mary Ellen?"

"I like you."

"Why?"

"Because your eyelashes curl up. All but the last one. That doesn't curl at all." She touched the eccentric lash with the tip of her finger.

"What a tragedy! Do you think I can ever live it down?" He kissed the exploring finger, held it against his cheek.

"And I like you because you're amusing."

"Any other reason?"

"Because," she hesitated; then added with an eager little rush, "Sometimes you aren't happy. I think you need me to take care of you."

"I certainly do," he agreed. "And you do it so well. Don't you ever get tired of it?"

She shook her head.

"Why not, pretty girl?"

"Because I like you."

"Sweet!" said Eric softly. "Lovely, funny child!"

They talked for a long time, lying side by side on the sand, their heads pillowed on Lita's scarlet cape. Mary Ellen had never felt so close to him, so warmly a part of his life. He told her pretty things, dear silly things about her eyes and her mouth and her chin, things which she tucked into the secret treasure-box in her heart to be remembered always. The sun drenched them with golden warmth, the sky stretched over them a limitless expanse of shining blue. Mary Ellen sighed happily. It seemed impossible that anything could mar her sweet content. But the cloud that was black as lamp-soot crept closer and closer, pursued by a frisky breeze.

It did not have the appearance of a cloud. It was not so impressive. It was merely a scrap of paper, a crumpled fragment torn from the rotogravure section of a Sunday newspaper six weeks old. The same frisky breeze that caressed Mary Ellen's hair snatched the fragment of paper from a lunch-basket where it had served to protect the sandwiches from a small boy's wet bathing suit, sent it skipping down the beach. It traveled in erratic spurts; sometimes it stopped altogether. But the fickle wind urged it on again until it finally came to rest beneath the striped umbrella.

Mary Ellen sitting up to look for Lita and Jerry saw the crumpled fragment of paper. She picked it up and smoothed it out on her knees.

"Why, it's six weeks old!" she exclaimed.

"What?" Eric asked lazily.

"This paper."

She glanced idly at the pictures: a bird's-eye view

of a parade, a beauty from some obscure region; two girls in peasant costumes with trays of flowers, Miss Madge Somebody and Miss Fifi Somebody-else, aides at a flower show; a pretty girl in a broad-brimmed hat. The name as well as the pretty girl's lower extremities was torn off. The picture which caught Mary Ellen's attention, however, was a row of puppies, darling baby puppies with soft pansy faces, drooping ears and round friendly eyes.

"Aren't they darling!" she murmured.

"What? Babies or Paris hats?"

Eric sat up, reached for the fragment of paper.

"Puppies," said Mary Ellen and handed it to him.

He looked at it carelessly at first, then with sudden fierce intensity. His lips settled into a grim line, a tortured expression shot into his eyes. He gazed at the paper for a moment which seemed an eternity. Then without a word he handed it to Mary Ellen and dropped back on the sand, as silent and as grim as the bronze soldier in the post-office square.

Mary Ellen folded the paper, slipped it into the pocket of her coat. She tried to chatter gayly as though nothing had happened. But Eric did not hear her. He had tramped off into some far desolate country, leaving her behind, forlorn and chilled on the sand at Half Moon Beach. The cloud as black as lamp-soot dimmed the sunlight, veiled the blue of the shimmering sky, settled into her heart. And the little birds who lived there tucked their heads under their wings, refused to utter a comforting cheep.

Eric was silent on the long ride home. Mary Ellen was so close to him that the sleeve of his sweater

brushed her cheek; yet he seemed thousands of miles away. Lita and Jerry were in high spirits. They laughed and joked. Mary Ellen tried to talk but the words could not force their way past the lump in her throat. Eric stared straight ahead, apparently unaware of her existence. She slipped her hand into his and it lay there cold and inert, missing the accustomed pressure of his fingers. A long, dreary, hopeless ride.

He said good-bye at the Gray Gables boat-landing. He looked at her, spoke to her as though she were an utter stranger. For the first time since she had known him he left without asking when he should see her again, left without a word of tenderness or a backward glance. Mary Ellen, standing on the dock, fought back the swelling tears, tried desperately hard to swallow the lump in her throat. She felt as though the bottom had dropped out of life, that there was no solid foundation for her feet. An hour ago she had been happy—and now. But she mustn't cry. Supper must be served. If she didn't think about anything except salad, and rolls and iced-tea, she might manage to get through the ordeal. She set her teeth, gallantly raised her chin and went upstairs to don her white linen dining-room dress.

That night after an interminable agony of fighting back the tears she climbed to her room up under the eaves. Lita was out. She was grateful for that. She wanted to be alone, to see if tears would melt the aching lump in her throat. She undressed and slipped a quilted kimono over her nightgown. It must be getting colder. She was chilled through and through. She turned back the covers, crawled into bed. Then she

drew the candlestick closer to the edge of the table beside her bed and unfolded the crumpled fragment of paper. She gazed at it intently, through a mist of tears, searched it for an explanation of the mystery. It couldn't have been the puppies. Their funny pansy faces curved her lips into a wan smile. It couldn't have been the parade. No single person in it was distinguishable; lines of marching dots. The flower show aides were not the sort of girls Eric liked. One of them had pouting lips and a mop of lightish hair. The other vaguely resembled Lita. No, the flower show girls were innocent. The beauty from an obscure region had a brazen air. She too was not responsible. That left only the girl in the broad-brimmed hat. . . .

Mary Ellen winked away the tears that misted her lashes, looked carefully at the face beneath the drooping hat. A beautiful face, oval in shape with a soft round chin. The eyes were large, widely spaced, tilted a bit at the corners. They might be blue or gray. Impossible to tell. The features were finely chiseled and stamped with a look of breeding. The full lips smiled, but the slanting eyes beneath the shadowy hat brim were inscrutable. The throat curved into the softness of a fur scarf. There was the suggestion of a filmy gown. That was all. No name; no explanation. But in some fashion she was connected with Eric, Mary Ellen's Eric; Eric with his grave dark eyes, his lashes that curled upward.

The memory of his lashes, the one in the corner that wouldn't curl brought the tears in a torrent. She buried her face in the pillow and cried until she was exhausted. Then she felt better. Hope whispered in

her heart, comforting, promising. Eric would sail over in the morning, explain, set everything right. She crumpled the fragment of paper into a wad, tossed it on the floor. He was fond of her, depended on her. . . . He would come. . . . To-morrow morning. . . . She closed her eyes and sent a fervent little prayer winging into space. . . . "Dear God, take care of Eric and don't let me be unhappy." . . . He would come. . . . In the morning. . . . Things like that didn't happen. It was impossible to sweep away in a moment the realities of a whole summer. . . . Silly to worry. . . . Eric would come. . . .

She slipped out of bed and returned with one of the ships Eric had carved for her. Then she blew out the yellow ribbon of candle-light and cuddled the ship with the silken sail beneath her cheek. The wind stirred the foliage of the tree outside her window, whispered a sleepy song. . . . From the distance came the soft murmur of the waves lapping against the wall at the edge of the lawn. . . . He will come. . . . To-morrow. . . . One last tear slipped through the lashes curving against her cheeks. A childish soft little sigh and Mary Ellen was fast asleep.

X

THE patter of rain on the shingled roof roused Mary Ellen the next morning. She drowsily opened her eyes, smiling a little because of a pleasant dream. The voice of the rain was soothing. She snuggled down under the covers for another nap, burrowed her head in the pillow. A sharp object pricked her cheek. She sat up to investigate. It was the tiny ship Eric had carved, its mast broken, its silken sail hanging limp.

The ship recalled her misery of the night before. Something had happened. Eric, grim and unsmiling, had sailed away without a backward glance, without asking when he should see her again. The cloud as black as lamp-soot again settled over her heart.

She dropped back on the pillow holding the broken ship in her hand. Fragments of memory slipped through her mind. . . . The puppies with their funny pansy faces. . . . The girl in the broad-brimmed hat. . . . Eric's eyes. . . . How could a scrap of paper change him so suddenly from a charming playmate to a replica of the bronze soldier in the post-office square? He had looked at her as though she were a stranger. How could he after all the happy hours they had spent together? Perhaps she would never see him again!

Waves of misery engulfed her. She realized with a pang of fear how completely Eric had absorbed her, how little was left of the Mary Ellen who first had

sailed to the island. She had given him gladly all of her sunshine, her courage, her loveliest dreams. There was nothing left. She felt like an empty shell. . . . Never to see him again, the rusty plumes in his hair, his hands, the eyelash that wouldn't curl! . . . A lump knotted in her throat. She turned her head, cried into the pillow while the rain on the roof drummed a melancholy refrain and the wind sighed through the trees outside her window.

But there was something left. Hope. It whispered comfortingly, pierced the cloud with a shining ray. Eric would come. . . . He needed her to take care of him. Things couldn't happen like that, everything forgotten in a single moment. . . . Perhaps he too was desperately unhappy. The lump in her throat melted away. Tenderness for Eric swelled in her heart. She longed to comfort him, to banish the anguish from his eyes, coax back to his lips the shadow of a smile. Selfish to think only of her own unhappiness. . . . He would come. . . . To-day. . . . "My candle shining in the darkness." . . . How often he had called her that. It was a pretty poor candle that flickered out when the clouds came. She scolded herself and immediately felt better. Silly to languish like the love-lorn heroine of a mid-Victorian novel. A broken heart might be romantic but it was vastly uncomfortable.

Her sense of humor and a tatter of courage rallied to her defence. She sprang out of bed, poured the china bowl full of water, plunged her face into its reviving coldness, emerged dripping, groping for a towel. A warm fragrant odor drifted up the stairs. Blueberry

muffins for breakfast. The prospect cheered her amazingly. Her heart couldn't be entirely broken. Lovelorn maidens gave no thought to food. She donned a fresh linen frock. It was jaunty and becoming. There were some pleasant things left in life; blueberry muffins, linen frocks. By the time the last hairpin was slipped into place she felt almost cheerful. She tripped off downstairs singing to keep up her courage the first melody that slipped into her mind. It was Ruby's favorite song. She smiled a little at the words. They fitted her state of mind so well:

"Sometimes I'm happy,
Sometimes I'm blue.
My disposition
Depends on you."

But her spirits drooped as the hours passed and Eric did not come. The rain increased, fell steadily, turned the world into a soggy unpleasant place. Ruby was cross. George's sister had been snippy. She banged doors and clattered the silverware. Aunt Molly had a touch of neuralgia. She sat close to the stove, held a hot-water bottle against her cheek. The milkman forgot to leave the cream. Mrs. Smithers instantly detected and resented tinned cream in her coffee. Aunt Ella worried about it, cut her thumb on the jagged edge of a can. The blueberry muffins burned on the bottom. The youngest Peterson upset her glass of milk and wailed when she was scolded. Breakfast was an ordeal.

Mrs. Smithers demanded a fire in the living-room. Mary Ellen soiled her linen frock getting chips from the wood-house. The fire was stubborn. It refused to

burn properly. The Peterson children held captive by the rain, ran wild. They quarreled and shrieked, and banged the furniture. At last in desperation Mary Ellen herded them into a corner of the dining-room, read " The Bobbsy Twins " until her throat ached and her patience stretched like a rubber band about to snap. Blue Monday with a vengeance! And in her heart a dull restless pain because the hours limped by and Eric did not come.

After the dinner dishes were wiped, she settled with her sewing on the seat beneath the window in the second-floor hall. The window faced the harbor. Through it she could see the island, a dim grayish blur obscured by the rain and mist. Her fingers completed the pattern of smocking on the new apricot-tinted dress without the assistance of her mind. That was engaged with dreary thoughts. She wondered what Eric was doing behind that gray curtain of fog. Were his eyes still troubled, his lips grim and unsmiling? Had he forgotten her? The pattern of smocking blurred beneath her eyes. She winked back the tears determined not to be dismal. Downstairs the oldest Peterson was practising her music lesson, thumping scales on the piano. Upstairs Lita strummed mournful tunes on her ukulele. Behind a closed door " Daisy Darling " yapped. Everything was horrid. If only the day had been pleasant! It was so much easier to be cheerful when the sun was shining. She peered through the windows, watching for Eric's boat. It did not come. Her spirits drooped lower and lower. The gallant tatter of courage dipped its colors to the ache in her heart. . . .

"Telephone, Mary Ellen," Ruby called up the stairs.

She sprang from the window-seat, spools, scissors, tiny thimble flying in all directions. It might be Eric. . . . It might. . . . She raced downstairs, her heart beating wildly.

But it was not Eric. It was Jim Mason. On this of all days. He wanted her to go to a dance over at Easter Haven that evening. There was to be an orchestra from the city and all the crowd was going. Mary Ellen felt as though she could never dance again. But to spend the evening alone with that restless ache in her heart! She might as well go. What if Jim did dance abominably? What if he bored her to tears, stepped on her toes, sang in her ears? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. She accepted the invitation in a listless fashion resenting the pleased tone in Jim's hearty, complacent voice when he said he would call for her at eight. No one had a right to be pleased about anything. It was three o'clock and Eric had not come. . . .

* * * * * * * *

"Stepping out?" asked Lita as Mary Ellen slipped the new apricot-tinted dress over her head that evening and listlessly smoothed her hair.

"I'm going to a dance."

"With Eric?" Lita perched on the edge of Mary Ellen's bed.

"No." Mary Ellen's lips trembled. She steadied them and replied, "With Jim Mason."

"Who is he?"

"A boy I've known all my life."

"Nice?"

"So so. He talks about potatoes and canned corn and the insides of automobiles."

"Sounds great. Where is the dance?"

"In Easter Haven. About thirty miles from Mayport on the other side of the harbor. There's a dance hall with paper roses on the ceiling."

"Who's going?" asked Lita presently.

"All that crowd. Susie Smith, Wally Ford and Irene Taylor. Lolly and Joe Bandarra, too, I suppose."

"Will it be amusing?"

"More fun than a circus," answered Mary Ellen. "Irene Taylor will giggle for hours; Wally Ford will be the life of the party; Fred Nutting will get drunk if possible. I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

"That bad?" Lita smiled, rose from the bed. "I'll make Jerry take me. How do you get there?"

"Straight road to Wareham. Then I think there's a detour. But you can't miss it. We usually sail over. It's shorter that way."

"See you later." Lita went over to her own room. "Save me a dance with your boy friend. I love to talk about potatoes!"

"You can have them all," answered Mary Ellen and crushed a soft felt hat over her hair. She did not glance in the mirror. What difference did it make whether or not the hat was becomingly tilted? It troubled her to look at her wan reflection. She mourned for the lost happy face that used to smile at her from the mirror. The prospect of an evening with Jim's crowd depressed her. How could she endure Wally

Ford's jokes, Jim's tedious conversation? He laughed so loudly, was a "good fellow" with all the world. But it embarrassed her. She always wanted to sink through the floor when Jim began to bray. Why had she said she would go? Better to have stayed at home She longed to lie down on the bed, bury her face in the pillow, cry until she mercifully fell asleep. It was quarter of eight and Eric had not come. . . .

Aunt Ella called up the stairs to announce Jim's arrival. There was a pleased tone in her voice. She liked Jim. He was making out well with his father in the grocery business. Andrew Mason and Son. It was the most prosperous store in town. Why, thought Mary Ellen, must good reliable boys, the kind you ought to marry, be so uninteresting? She snatched up her coat from the back of a chair and slowly descended the stairs. Jim's voice, his hearty laugh boomed up from the living-room. She walked very slowly down the last flight of stairs, struggling to compose her features into a welcoming smile.

He was sitting on the sofa, a bulky, squarely built figure with a ruddy complexion, enormous hands and feet. Usually he was untidy but to-night he was meticulously shaved and brushed. He wore a new suit, a tie of violent color, light tan shoes brilliantly polished. His mouse-colored hair was plastered down with brilliantine. He smelled of bay rum, of barber shop lotions and scented soap. To him the dance at Easter Haven was evidently an important event. No ordinary occasion inspired such rigorous grooming, induced him to wear a colored handkerchief in his breast pocket. His near-sighted eyes peered through shell-

rimmed glasses; his cheeks looked as though they had been polished with pumice stone.

"Well, I guess we better be moving," he said after an interval of greetings.

"All right," agreed Mary Ellen with scant enthusiasm.

"You drive careful, Jim," cautioned Aunt Ella with a pleased, motherly tone in her voice. "It's as dark as Egypt to-night."

"Leave it to me, Mrs. Bassett. I'll take good care of the little girl." He beamed upon Mary Ellen like a benevolent owl and held her coat wrong side up.

"The other way, Jim. I can't stand on my head."

"Beg pardon. My mistake. There. That's right." He patted her shoulder. "Ready now?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

Aunt Ella followed them to the door.

"My, but the fog is thick!" she exclaimed. "Drive careful, children, and have a good time."

"You bet," boomed Jim.

"Good-bye, darling." Mary Ellen dropped a kiss on Aunt Ella's cheek. "Don't worry if we're late."

"I'll take good care of her," Jim promised and proceeded to do so. He was not much taller than Mary Ellen but he bent toward her protectingly, helped her up the steps to the sidewalk as though she were made of egg-shell porcelain.

"I'm glad you could go," he said as he closed the gate.

"It was nice of you to ask me," said Mary Ellen and wished he would not clutch her arm so tightly.

"Bad night but I guess we won't get wet."

"A new car! Jim, aren't you stylish!"

"Pretty smooth, eh?" He gestured proudly at the roadster drawn up beside the curb, its beauties hidden by the fog. "Regular seagoing hack. Like it, Mary Ellen?"

"It's lovely," she answered with an attempt at enthusiasm.

"You can have it, if you don't mind taking the chauffeur too." He laughed loudly and squeezed her elbow. "How about it? Say, there, look out for puddles. Shall I carry you?"

Mary Ellen recalled the evening that Eric had carried her along the road from the lighthouse. The pain in her heart grew sharper.

"No—no, thank you, Jim. I can manage."

"I'll spread down my coat if you say," he offered and roared at his own cleverness.

"It would be a shame to spoil a new suit. I'll hop. There are dry spots between the puddles."

Jim opened the door, handed her in with a flourish.

"I guess you'll be warm enough with the curtains on. They're a special make," he explained. "Cost extra but I always get the best. Pays in the end, don't you think so?"

"Why yes, I suppose it does," said Mary Ellen without giving the matter any thought.

"Same way with upholstery," continued Jim crawling in behind the wheel. "Real leather. Bounce, and you'll see how soft it is."

Mary Ellen obligingly bounced.

"Comfortable?"

"Very," answered Mary Ellen dreading the long

ride alone with Jim in the intimacy of the curtained car. If he should get sentimental, if he should want to kiss her. . . .

But she need not have worried. Jim was entirely absorbed in the car.

"Sweet boat!" He set the windshield scraper to clicking, flicked a drop of moisture from the polished wheel. "She'll make eighty miles an hour."

"Oh, Jim!" gasped Mary Ellen. "Not to-night."

"Don't worry. I won't let her out in the fog. Listen to that motor!" he exclaimed as they crossed the causeway. "Smooth as velvet."

He listed for Mary Ellen the merits of the car, explained its inner workings with the zest of a surgeon discussing the human body. The discourse lasted until they were out of the village and well on the way to Wareham. Then his conversation veered to the grocery business. His father was about to start a branch store in Rockville and he was to have full charge. He expatiated upon the building and equipment, the electric coffee grinder, the meat slicer, window displays and other interesting details. He quoted prices with the facility of an advertising catalogue. He asked Mary Ellen's opinion on the advisability of carrying a line of high-grade candy and without waiting for the opinion plunged into an account of a recent altercation with a traveling salesman. Needless to say the salesman was worsted. Jim had emerged from the tilt with flying colors, had saved the day for the reputable firm of Andrew Mason and Son.

Mary Ellen, curled up in the corner of the real leather seat, made no effort to talk. She was grateful

for Jim's interest in gear shifts and groceries. His words built a wall between them, shut her away with her thoughts. She wondered if Eric was lonely, if he missed her and, curiously enough, if he had remembered to water Aunt Molly's geranium. She thought of the things she had left in the palace; her work-basket, an amber comb, a green jersey. She was glad they were there. Perhaps they would make Eric think of her, recall for him countless happy memories. . . . He would come. . . . To-morrow. . . . The rain had prevented to-day. He had only an open boat. Perhaps it would be pleasant to-morrow. He would come to her sailing through the sunlight, his hair tousled by the wind and when he saw her waiting for him on the landing his eyes would brighten in the dear remembered way. . . . Silly to fret. . . . He would come. . . . To-morrow. . . .

Presently they reached the detour. Jim turned off the highway grumbling at the mud and ruts in the less traveled road.

"Ten miles out of the way," he said. "We'd have made better time to come by water if it had been a clear night."

"Yes, we would," agreed Mary Ellen. "It's a straight course from the point to Easter Haven."

"Remember the night we sailed over last year and Fred Nutting had a fight with a Portugee?"

"Yes, I remember," said Mary Ellen and shuddered slightly.

"Fred's a good scout but he ought to leave bootleg whiskey alone. I don't drink. It's not good business. You need a clear head to beat the game these days."

Mary Ellen felt that she should commend this virtuous attitude. She was casting about in her mind for appropriate words when she discovered that Jim's entire attention was devoted to driving. The car lurched and slithered, toiled valiantly through the mud. Mary Ellen was tossed from one side to the other. She clutched the curtain support for safety, prayed that they wouldn't get stuck. It seemed a long way from Wareham to Easter Haven but at last the lights of the town blinked through the mist. They rolled down the main street, reached the dance pavilion and parked at the end of a line of cars. Jim helped Mary Ellen out and promptly forgot all about her. The new roadster was spattered with mud. He eyed it ruefully and attempted to repair the damage with his handkerchief. He polished the windshield, rubbed at the fenders, mourned for its glossy enamel.

"Won't it get splashed again on the way home?" asked Mary Ellen politely but wearily after an interval of standing on a dry strip of road between two enormous puddles.

"I suppose so." Jim wiped the radiator cap with lingering tenderness and tossed his muddy handkerchief to the winds. "Well, what say we go in?"

The dance pavilion faced the bay. It was a square building with a vast expanse of polished floor, hinged windows that might be lowered in pleasant weather. Paper roses bloomed in profusion on the ceiling; electric bulbs concealed in their petals diffused soft light. The orchestra occupied a platform at one end of the floor. The nickel and brass of the instruments reflected the mellow light. There was a refreshment

stand somewhere in the rear. The odor of sizzling hot dogs mingled with the odors which rose from the dance floor: Beechnut gum and cheap perfume, Lucky Strikes, hair oil, scented soap. The noise was deafening. It crashed about Mary Ellen's ears; the din of the orchestra, shuffling feet, voices, shrill laughter.

"Pretty swell joint," said Jim complacently. "Want to dance?"

Mary Ellen suffered Jim to place his arm about her waist, rested her hand on his bulky shoulder. He ploughed a determined furrow through the maze of dancers, bumped into people, shouted an apology, was off again cheerful and persistent, all out of time with the music. They passed familiar couples, exchanged greetings. Irene Taylor, too plump for taffeta ruffles, was doing fancy steps with Wally Ford and giggling rapturously. Fred Nutting was well on the way to a successful evening. He had reached the hilarious stage and was swooping wildly about leaving destruction in his wake. Susie Smith clung dizzily to his shoulder, her skirt swirling like a fluff of chiffon tossed by a whirlwind. Joe Bandarra guided Lolly smoothly about the floor.

"Hello, Mary Ellen," he called as they circled past. "How's the girl?"

"Fine, thank you."

"'Lo there!" Lolly waved her hand over Joe's shoulder.

"Some night!" added Joe.

"Great weather for ducks!" Jim laughed loudly and bumped into a strange couple. "Beg pardon! My fault! What this dance needs is a traffic cop." He

lurched toward an open space in the middle of the floor well pleased with his wit and gallantry.

As the evening wore on Mary Ellen's misery increased. Why, oh why had she come? It was so tawdry, so cheap; the paper flowers, the blaring music, Wally Ford's jokes. Jim danced as though he were walking through a ploughed field. He held her too tightly, sang in her ear, "Ain't she nice. Look her over once or twice" . . .

"Let's sit down for a while, please Jim."

"What's the matter, honey?"

"I'm tired."

"Want to go out in the car?" Jim mopped his perspiring brow. "Hot in here. I'll get your coat."

Mary Ellen fancied the dawning of a sentimental gleam in Jim's near-sighted eyes. She preferred the crowded dance floor to the curtained car.

"Never mind. We'll dance," she said hastily.

"All right. You're the doctor." Again Jim placed his arm around her waist, swung her around the floor.

The time passed slowly. Mary Ellen longed to be back in her room up under the eaves. Irene Taylor pranced past them, her giggle rising to a shrill crescendo, her cheek against Wally Ford's. They were having a beautiful time. How could they? She thought of evenings with Eric, sitting on the steps at the edge of the lawn, watching the necklace of lights across the harbor; walking along the shadowy roads content with the stars, the music of the waves, the wind in the trees. Things like that were graceful and charming. She hated the wail of the saxophones, the mad pounding of tom-toms, coarse voices, silly jokes. She

always had hated them. Always she had cherished the dream of a different sort of life, the house with casement windows, books, pleasant companionship. . . . Someone to talk to, someone who would understand. . . . The dream had been vague and formless until Eric came. Now she realized how delightful that life might be. But it was not for her. Eric had sailed away, grim, unsmiling. . . . And the saxophones wailed, the tom-toms pounded, Jim sang in her ear, "Now I ask you very confidentially, ain't she sweet?" . . .

Lita arrived. Mary Ellen saw her dancing with Jerry and waved to them. Presently Lita was dancing with Joe Bandarra. People watched them, whispered to each other. Lolly danced with Jerry. She chattered and sparkled, appeared all smiles and sunshine but Mary Ellen knew that her gaiety was forced, saw the look of fright in her eyes. Poor Lolly! In love with Joe Bandarra. Was anyone in the world completely happy? . . .

At intermission they crowded around a table in the refreshment stand. Wally Ford let Irene make him up with rouge and lip stick. The crowd shrieked its approval. Susie Smith told a joke—not a very nice joke—and the crowd shrieked again. Jim talked on in his ponderous fashion undaunted by the fact that nobody paid the least attention. Mary Ellen nibbled a sandwich, feeling desolate and out of place in the boisterous group. Bantering remarks, fragments of conversation, the senseless patter of the "crowd" struck at her ears:

"Gentlemen prefer blondes." That was Fred Nut-

ting's contribution. He sat with his arm around Susie Smith, her yellow head on his shoulder.

"Gentlemen! Hate yourself, don't you?"

"Hey, Susie, where were you last night?"

"Oh, Wally, you slay me!"

"Be yourself, sister. Who do you think I am, a big butter-and-egg man?"

"Knows her onions! You bet."

"Did you ever hear that one about the old maid and ——"

"Go on now. Act your age!"

"Oh, Jim, how can you be so wonderful!" . . .

Lita and Jerry sat at another table. How slim and exquisite Lita appeared in comparison with the other girls! Her knitted frock of fuchsia silk was severely plain. The soft felt hat bore no ornament. Her lip salve was skilfully applied. She ate nothing at all, sat with her hands indolently folded against the porcelain top of the table, talked to Jerry in her cool lazy voice. A lady slumming, a duchess viewing with amused toleration the holiday antics of her peasants. But Mary Ellen, watching intently, saw Lita's dark eyes stray occasionally toward the noisy group at her own table, meet Joe Bandarra's eyes in a swift, fleeting glance.

Presently the music started again and they rushed into the dance hall, leaving behind a litter of empty bottles, melting ice-cream, smouldering cigarettes. Mary Ellen danced with Wally Ford and felt like a monkey on a stick. She danced with Fred Nutting. He was sulky because Susie was flirting with Joe, because too many comrades had imbibed from his private

flask. Long, long dances. Encores. Long, long encores.

"This one's going to be a waltz," announced Jim as the lights grew dim and shadows trooped across the floor. "You dance this one with your Uncle Dudley. We'll show 'em how it should be done."

It was a waltz. The tom-toms were silent; the saxophones ceased to wail. The poignant voice of a muted violin rose above the crooning accompaniment. The tune was familiar. Mary Ellen listened . . . remembered. . . . It was the haunting waltz she had heard at the movies that night she had gone with Eric. Her throat ached; tears jeweled her lashes. . . . "I wonder why you keep me waiting." . . . Happy night. . . . Her hand in Eric's. . . . The fat man who went to sleep with his mouth open. . . . Eric. . . . To see him again! To dance with him, feel his arm around her. . . . But it was Jim's arm that held her, Jim's voice that talked on and on and on. About groceries, perhaps. She did not listen. . . . "I wonder if I keep on dreaming" . . . The violin, thin and sweet, sang through the shadows. . . . If Eric were only there. . . .

And suddenly, miraculously, there he was, leaning against the frame idly watching the dancers. Mary Ellen's heart beat frantically. Her knees threatened to hinge both ways. She felt limp, weak, bewildered. Perhaps she had imagined it. Perhaps she was delirious! She closed her eyes and quickly opened them again. He was still there, leaning against the door and the light just above brightened the coppery plumes in his hair. He saw her . . . smiled. . . . The

ache in her heart melted away. Oh, beautiful, breath-taking miracle! Eric was there!

When the music stopped, he was standing beside her. She did not remember introducing him to Jim, was unable to recall a word that either of them had spoken. She remembered only that when the violin again sang that haunting waltz tune she was dancing with Eric, her cheek brushing the rough tweed of his coat, his arm holding her tightly. They did not talk just then. There was no need for words. The music spoke for them, the clasp of their hands, the beating of their hearts. And the tawdry dance hall was bathed in glamorous light; the second rate orchestra played music celestial upon harps of beaten gold; the paper flowers on the ceiling were transformed into velvety blossoms, spilling their fragrance, showering their petals upon a crystal floor where Mary Ellen danced alone with Eric.

"Come outside where I can talk to you," he said when the dance was over and the lights brightened.

And Mary Ellen who would have followed him to the end of the world, clung to his hand, went with him out into the darkness. They found a bench on the narrow strip of unroofed veranda facing the bay. The bench was sodden with moisture but neither of them appeared to notice that trifling detail.

"Are you glad to see me?" asked Eric holding her close.

"So glad!"

"I was afraid you wouldn't be."

"Why, Eric?"

"After yesterday."

Already yesterday seemed dim and far away. There was no room in her heart for the memory of pain. Eric was there, close beside her. That was quite enough.

"Were you very unhappy?" he asked.

"Not very," she answered and believed that she spoke the truth.

"I'm sorry. But don't fret about it. I think it will never happen again. I'm almost sure that it never can happen again."

There was a glad free note in his voice, as though he had been released from a heavy burden. "That's all over. It can have nothing to do with you or with me. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, Eric."

"I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind. Do you trust me, Mary Ellen?"

She answered him with a swift, upward glance of her shining eyes.

"I was afraid you would hate me."

His voice was husky with emotion; the arm which held her trembled.

"Hate you! Oh, Eric, I couldn't."

"I wouldn't have blamed you but I think I should have walked off the end of the dock."

"Eric!" Her hands fluttered against her heart.

"I thought of the freckle on your left eyelid, your twisted braids, your firm little Baptist chin. I can't seem to get along without them, Mary Ellen. My palace is a dreary shack when you are not there to make it beautiful. No light scatters the shadows except the green candles that flame in your eyes. I'm selfish and thoughtless—and ——"

"You're not," she protested and laid her finger against his lips.

"And no earthly good," he finished. "But I can't get along without you. I've been wretched all day long and I knew I couldn't sleep to-night unless I had seen you. When I called at Gray Gables Aunt Ella told me you were here. I'd have made it sooner except for the fog."

"Did you come in the boat?"

"Yes. It's the only straight course. I couldn't risk any detours when I was coming to you. Now, I'll go back to the island."

"Don't go, Eric." She clutched his sleeve, afraid to lose him again.

"I must. It isn't fair to take you away from your friends. But I'll see you to-morrow, the next day and the next. The Palace will not be dismal to-night. I'll take some of the candle shine with me, that kiss at the corner of your mouth——"

"And my love," said Mary Ellen softly.

"Do you want me to have that?"

"Every bit."

"Darling!" He took the kiss at the corner of her mouth. Another one immediately grew in its place. So he took that too, for good measure.

"I've thought about you all day. Here's the proof, signed, sealed and delivered."

He placed in her hand a folded sheet of paper.

"What is it, Eric?"

"Don't look at it until you get home."

"All right."

She slipped the paper inside her blouse.

"I'm going now. Before I'm obliged to fight a duel with the grocery king."

"Be careful of the fog, Eric."

"There isn't any. Haven't you noticed?"

Mary Ellen glanced out across the bay. The fog indeed had lifted; the sky was pricked with a pattern of stars.

"The stars are shining!" she exclaimed; and the radiance of starlight, moonlight, sunlight gleamed in her eyes.

"Go back and dance with your boy friend," said Eric lifting her from the bench. "But you can tell him for me that this is the last time he's going to run off with my girl. I can't spare you. Not one evening."

He left her in the doorway, dreaming, starry-eyed, lifted from a world of paper roses and pop bottles into a seventh high heaven of sweet content. Eric's parting words echoed in her ears, outsang the melodies stirring in her heart. . . . "To-morrow, dear. . . . To-morrow. . . ."

* * * * * * * *

Mary Ellen scarcely remembered the ride home. She was remotely conscious of the fact that Jim's arm was around her, that he was driving with one hand. It troubled her not at all. Jim's arm held only her last summer's coat, the apricot-tinted dress. Mary Ellen was not there. Beyond the clouds, beyond the stars she drifted through space on waves of ether, silver crested, light as foam. And the music of all the ages sang around her, shut out Jim's voice, the purr of the motor, the turning of the wheels.

"Asleep, Mary Ellen?" asked Jim as they stopped in front of Gray Gables.

"Why, no," Mary Ellen answered dreamily surprised to find herself in a world of familiar objects.

"Well then, will you?"

"Will I what?"

"Take a ride to-morrow night."

"Why, no, Jim, I can't." Mary Ellen ignored his hand, stepped out of the car. "I'll be busy to-morrow, and the next day, and the next."

She walked swiftly down the steps, between the borders of phlox, and closed the front door, entirely unconscious of the fact that she had neglected to say goodnight.

Upstairs in her room under the low folded roof she lit the candle and smoothed out the sheet of paper Eric had given her. It was drawing paper, heavy, creamy white, covered with faces exquisitely drawn. There were happy faces and sad ones, wistful faces and faces that smiled. She drew the candle nearer, looked at them closely. An expression of astonishment crept into her eyes, an exclamation of surprise slipped through her parted lips. She realized with a thrill of delight that they were sketches of her, that each of the charming, exquisitely drawn faces was her own.

XI

PLEASANT weather followed the "Blue Monday" of rain and fog. The days were warm, mellow with sunshine; the evenings, cool, star-showered, crisped with the chill of approaching autumn. Dahlias flowered in Aunt Molly's garden, great tufted blossoms, bronze, amber, wine-red, too heavy for their slender stalks. Bitter-sweet, a few sprays of early goldenrod brightened the road to the lighthouse. The wild rose vines on the island were hung with hard reddish-brown balls. Summer was nearly over.

Mary Ellen gave scant attention to the harbingers of autumn. Life again moved to a happy rhythm. She sailed and swam with Eric, idled about on the rocks. Unhappiness was forgotten. Eric seemed closer to her than ever before. It was as though a wall between them had been leveled. He seemed happier, talked more often of his childhood, his mother, the father he vaguely remembered. Gray moods no longer claimed him. He wandered into no far desolate country, walked no path she might not follow. He was tender, amusing, very dear.

A fresh interest banished his restless moments. He sketched a great deal. A pad of paper accompanied them on their walks. His pocket bristled with pencils. Mary Ellen posed for him hours at a time, never bored, never weary. He whistled when he worked and rumpled his hair. That amused her. She liked to watch his scowl of fierce concentration, the pleased expression

that brightened his eyes when the drawing was good. She did not mind his utter absorption in the work. It was good for him. And if she wandered off for a moment he called her back. Though he seldom spoke to her while his pencil traveled over the paper, he liked to know that she was close beside him. She wondered constantly why he had not sketched earlier in the summer. He was not a novice carried away by a new enthusiasm. His fingers had been trained to trace sure delicate lines. She knew instinctively that his drawings were exquisitely done.

"Eric," she said as they sat one evening on the rocks.

"Yes, pretty girl."

"Why didn't you tell me you could draw?"

"You didn't ask me."

"Yes I did."

"When?"

"One afternoon on the rocks."

"You asked me if I painted pictures. I don't."

"Did you ever?"

"Years ago."

"How many years?"

"Five. I haven't touched a brush since."

"Why?"

"Too lazy, I suppose."

"That isn't true."

"No," he said slowly. "That isn't quite true. I've been afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"That I had forgotten. I could paint . . . once upon a time."

"Why did you stop?"

"Because life ended. The boy who could paint, the boy who believed in things . . . died."

"Died, Eric?"

"I thought he did. I smashed his brushes, locked the door of his studio, buried his talent in oblivion. It was a shame. He was a nice lad, Mary Ellen. You would have liked him. He thought the world was a pleasant place. He believed in honor, ambition, ideals. . . . Sometimes he dreamed of a house with casement windows."

"Why did you let him die?" asked Mary Ellen softly.

"Because I was a coward. It would have required a vast amount of courage to let him live. I buried him one evening in a city park and tramped off to forget him. I could not quite do that. Unfortunately he looked like me. I thought of him sometimes when I brushed my hair. That's queer, isn't it? I thought of him when I saw a sunset over the ocean, felt the salt spray, heard the sound of the waves. He loved the sea . . . boats. . . . But I never regretted his death until you sailed over to my island. Then I was sorry. I should have liked to give him to you."

Eric paused. His voice trailed off into silence. The waves curled against the edge of the rocks, broke with a murmuring splash. A curving new moon sailed high in the heavens. Across the harbor drifted the sad sweet sound of bells . . . "The sun shines bright in my old Kentucky home" . . . Mary Ellen's lashes were wet with tears, tears for the boy who died,

for Eric who had tried to forget him. She wanted to comfort him, somehow. . . . Words were futile. She dropped her head on his shoulder, slipped her hand into his. And the bells sang plaintively . . . "'Tis summer, the darkies are gay." . . .

"If he had known there was a girl like you in the world," Eric presently continued, "a girl as sweet, as brave, as wise, I think he could not have died. Sometimes now, I wonder if he is really dead. I find myself thinking of the things he wanted to do."

"Perhaps he was only sleeping," said Mary Ellen softly.

"Perhaps. I'm not quite sure. . . . Shall I tell you why I began to sketch again?"

"Please."

"It was because I wanted to make a drawing of you. I've drawn your face a thousand times in my mind. But I was afraid to try. That's why I carved boats for you. I was afraid I had forgotten how to draw. It seemed only fair that the gods should punish me for being a coward. A thousand times I picked up a pencil, broke it into bits because I dared not attempt to trace a line. For five years I had struggled to forget all that, to put it forever out of my life. I did not care. I was glad that I had no desire to draw. But to have the desire and not be able to satisfy it! That was ghastly, Mary Ellen. I dreamed sometimes that I had tried and failed. I dreamed that my fingers could not hold the pencil and I woke terrified. The desire to put your face on paper, your curving brows, your straight little nose, your shy wild dryad eyes became a torment. But I was a coward. I was afraid

to try. Then one day you scolded me. That made me mad."

"Mad, Eric?" asked Mary Ellen anxiously. "At me?"

"Lord no. At myself. You thought I was useless. I was, Mary Ellen. Useless and a quitter. But I didn't want you to think so."

"I didn't," she protested gravely. "Indeed I never did."

"I shouldn't have blamed you. I deserved it. But just the same I hated you to know it. I wanted, more than I have wanted anything for a long time, your respect, and your admiration. You would have no use for a quitter. You are brave, Mary Ellen."

"I'm not. I'm afraid of cows and school directors and bad boys who throw spit balls. I'm not brave, Eric."

"Those things are unimportant. You're brave about living. You made me ashamed of myself."

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"It was good for me. I made up my mind that I'd show you. My pride was hurt. I wanted to show off, to balance a peanut on my nose, walk the ridge-pole of a house like a kid bent on winning the admiration of a lady in curls and hair ribbons. It was great to care like that about anything. I had been dead for so long. Five years, Mary Ellen. That's a long time when you are young. . . . The best years. . . . I set my jaw and began to sketch. It was hard at first. I had forgotten a great deal. But I kept on. I used to tramp off to out-of-the-way places. You remember Miss Lillie Belle saw me one day in Rock-

ville. . . . It came back gradually. I was able to make those drawings of you. All that long miserable day I sketched your face. . . . Hundreds of Mary Ellens. . . ."

"They were lovely," she said with a little catch in her voice.

"But I wasn't merely showing off, trying to balance a peanut on my nose. I sketched them to keep you close to me. I was afraid I had lost you. . . . I sketched you in all your varying moods. Your eyes smiling at me from the paper helped me through that dismal day. I couldn't wait to reach you when the drawings were finished. You've helped me over so many bad hours."

"I'd like to, Eric, but I'm not very wise."

"You are wise and sweet and brave. You've done something to me that no one else ever did. You have given me back my confidence, my self-respect. Do you remember the gent who shot the albatross?"

"The Ancient Mariner? Yes, I remember him. We read it in school."

"I feel as he must have felt when the thing dropped off his neck. That's what you've done for me. I'd like to express my gratitude. What can I give you?"

She did not answer. She couldn't. There was a lump in her throat. Tears trembled on her lashes, happy tears. The music of the bells, rising, falling, singing across the water made her heart ache intolerably. . . . "Weep no more my lady . . . Oh, weep no more to-day. . . ."

"What can I give you, Mary Ellen?" Eric asked again.

Still she did not answer.

"A pearl necklace?"

She shook her head.

"A collie as yellow as sunshine?"

Again the negative motion of her head.

"A house with casement windows?" he asked softly.

"No, Eric," she said in a very small voice.

"What then?"

"That lonesome look in your eyes."

"What!" he exclaimed. "For heaven's sake what would you do with that?"

"I'd dig a little hole in the garden," she explained. "I'd bury it way down deep and pile rocks on the top."

"Why?" he asked.

"So I would never, never see it again," she answered. "I don't like that lonesome look."

"You darling!"

His arms folded around her. She lifted her lips to his. The waves curled and splashed unnoticed. The moon sailed over the island, paused to rest on the top of Tarpaper Palace. Moments slipped away on swift jeweled wings. And the bells in the Portuguese church sang softly, sadly . . . "Then weep no more for your old Kentucky home. For your old Kentucky home far away. . . ."

"You're shivering, Mary Ellen," said Eric after a long interval of silence.

"It is cold," she said.

"The wind has an edge. How about some coffee?"

"That would be nice."

"We'll find some."

He lifted her to her feet. They climbed over the

rocks, emerged into the lane which led down-hill to the road along the bay.

"How about that place down by the dock?"

"Oh, Eric, would you dare?"

"Why not?"

"Mrs. Smithers says it's a wicked place."

"Hook with Mrs. Smithers!"

"They light it with candles stuck in bottles. Whiskey bottles."

"You don't mean it!"

"And the artists go there," laughed Mary Ellen.

"Don't worry, sweet. If a bold bad artist attacks you I'll tweak his nose with terrible violence."

"And the waitress wears trousers!"

"Sensible idea."

"Mrs. Smithers says the authorities should close it."

"I think we ought to investigate. Let's see what Mayport has to offer in the line of wickedness."

But it wasn't wicked. It was friendly and pleasant. A ship's lantern burned over the door. The candles flamed brightly, dripped streams of wax over the bottles, obscured the iniquitous labels. The building had once been used for a boat house. The ceiling was festooned with fish-nets; the walls lined with panels of beaver board covered with paintings, pirates, ships with colored sails, a mermaid on a rock engaged in combing her long golden hair. There were narrow tables, nail kegs for chairs. No scene of bacchanalian revelry greeted Mary Ellen and Eric. In one corner two elderly men bent over a checker-board. A pretty girl in a Spanish shawl sat under the mermaid panel, talked to a young man in white flannel trousers. At

another table a girl in a silk smock and long amber earrings was writing busily, apparently unconscious of the people around her. Two girls with ragged bobs watched a stout young man mould figures in the dripping candle wax. A Victrola somewhere in the rear of the establishment played negro folk songs.

"So this is the den of iniquity!" whispered Eric. "I'm disappointed, aren't you?"

"It's nice, isn't it? I love the pirates."

"Here come the trousers. What a ghastly sight!"

They were sailor trousers dyed sea-green. Not ghastly, Mary Ellen reflected, rather cunning. The waitress who wore them was a slim little thing with round childish eyes and dark hair cut like the hair of a medieval page. She greeted them with a smile and a pleasant "Good-evening," asked them if they would like to look around.

"I feel as though I am calling on the President," Eric whispered when the little waitress turned to point out the features of interest.

"We should have worn white gloves," Mary Ellen answered. "Cunning, isn't she?"

"Friendly, at any rate. And not conspicuously wicked."

The little waitress told them that the paintings on the walls had been done by visiting artists. Some of the names were familiar. The girl with the fan and the long expanse of shimmering hose was signed by a famous commercial artist. Mary Ellen had seen his signature in the magazines. The nine gallant pirates standing shoulder to shoulder in a formidable line were the work of a well-known illustrator. There were car-

toons of prominent people, roughly but amusingly sketched. The creator of a comic strip character had left his jovial little man on a panel beside the mermaid. Mary Ellen recognized the waitress in a row of silhouettes smudgily done in charcoal.

"It's interesting, isn't it?" whispered Mary Ellen.

"You're lovely in candle-light," Eric replied ignoring the mermaid, smiling into her eyes.

"Look at the tops of the tables, Eric."

"I'd rather look at you."

"Silly!"

"Darling!" . . .

The little waitress displayed the table tops, explained that they had been painted by friends in New York. On one a bewitching Pierrette spread her fluffy skirts, flirted with a slim Pierrot above a heart-shaped mask. Fairy-tale characters tripped across another, Red Riding Hood pursued by a wolf with a long red tongue, Cinderella, the Babes in the Wood. One was enlivened by a cubist sunrise over a geometrical sea. There were snaky ladies with green hair and cadaverous faces on another. Mary Ellen did not like that one. She was sure it would take away her appetite. The waitress in sea-green trousers led them around the room, chattered in a pleasant friendly fashion. By the time the tour was completed Mary Ellen felt as though they were old friends, wondered why she had never visited the coffee-house before. The little waitress asked them where they would like to sit. Mary Ellen selected the fairy-tale table. The waitress left them there, tripped off in her tiny green sandals to bring them coffee and crackers and cheese.

"You would choose this one," teased Eric and smiled at her across the table.

"I prefer Little Red Riding Hood to snaky ladies with green hair," she answered.

"What a queer girl! I'm afraid you haven't the artistic temperament."

"Do you mind, Eric?"

His eyes softened with the tender look she knew so well.

"I wouldn't have you changed. Not the least little bit."

"Really, Eric?"

"Not even one freckle, one eyelash, one strand of your lovely hair."

"That's nice! It saves me a great deal of worry." She sighed happily, cupped her chin in her hands, smiled at Eric through the flickering candle-light.

The coffee was delicious. The little waitress brought it in a shining pot. She brought two cups with dragons writhing about them, lifting their tails to form the handles, two dragon plates heaped with crackers, triangles of cheese wrapped in tinfoil. Mary Ellen poured the coffee and handed Eric his cup.

"You do that very well," he remarked, smiling at her with an unaccustomed twinkle in his grave dark eyes.

"What?"

"Pour my coffee."

"Thank you."

"Want a steady job?"

"I'll think it over," she said and prudently lowered her lashes.

"This is great." Eric glanced around the room. "Why didn't we come here before?"

"It's new this year," Mary Ellen answered. "I didn't think about it. We natives are supposed to despise the artists. Grandfather has no use for them. He cuts and shellacs beaver board for the art shop sometimes and always says it's a waste of good building material."

"I can understand. Some of them are impossible."

"They think they own the place." Mary Ellen said. "They walk into private gardens without asking permission, trample the flowers and drip paint all over everything."

"The frogs of Egypt were no worse than a swarm of would-be artists." Eric agreed. "But there are sincere ones. The old chap who taught me. . . . I'll show you his work sometime. It's gorgeous."

He told her then about art school, adventures in a world of attic studios and cellar cafés. He smiled at the memory of youthful escapades, sipped his coffee, quiet, relaxed, content. Mary Ellen listened happily, pleased because Eric shared his memories with her. And the thought occurred to her, "He's known so many interesting people. How can he care about me?" . . . But he did care. His eyes softened when he looked at her; his hand reached across the table to touch hers; his voice made music of her plain little old-fashioned name. . . . Beautiful miracle. . . . Eric cared about her. . . . She asked nothing more of life. . . .

The fat young man left off moulding figures from candle wax, strummed a banjo, sang a popular song,

The girls with the ragged bobs assisted. One of them had a remarkable voice, full, round and golden. The girl in the Spanish shawl joined in. The two elderly men folded the checker-board. One of them rumbled a lusty bass. It was all very friendly and pleasant.

"Wicked, isn't it?" Eric smiled. "Sounds to me like an evening on the old front steps."

"Mrs. Smithers loves to croak. When she gets to heaven she'll find something to be shocked about."

"The angels will wear their wings too short or she'll discover that St. Peter is involved in an amorous intrigue. It must be great to have an imagination like hers."

"It's hard on the rest of the world," Mary Ellen sighed. "She advised Aunt Ella to keep an eye on me. I think she doesn't approve of you, Eric."

"Who cares? I don't; so long as you approve of me. Do you approve of me, pretty girl?"

"Of course, silly!"

"Good. That makes me feel better. I have suddenly discovered that I crave approval. I never used to care."

"Fun, isn't it?" Mary Ellen smiled as the coffee-house guests swung into another sprightly chorus.

"Everything is fun with you. Do you like me tonight?"

"Heaps! . . . Oh, Eric, just see who is coming in?"

His eyes followed hers to the door, discovered Madame Cavella wrapped in a velvet cloak, her pink and white face beaming beneath her silvery pompa-

dour. She saw them, waved her hand, bore down upon them like a battleship decorated for the Fourth of July.

"Discovered!" she exclaimed as she reached the table.

"Who is?" Mary Ellen rose to greet her.

"I am. But you won't tell, will you? I would be socially ostracized, cast into utter darkness by the rocking-chair fleet. Goodness, I can't sit on one of those things!" She waved away the nail keg Eric offered. "Where's Peggy? She'll get me a chair."

The little waitress appeared and smiled at Madame Cavella, a delighted expression in her round brown eyes.

"I thought you weren't coming this evening," the little waitress said. "And we made fudge cake especially for you."

"Hush!" said Madame Cavella and chuckled gleefully. "You'll give them the impression that I've been here before. And don't mention fudge cake! Mary Ellen, here, makes me eat spinach and bran-toast. She's a tyrant. Look, Peggy my love, they're trying to make me roost on a nail keg. Where is my private chair?"

The little waitress produced from the rearward regions a substantial armchair. Madame Cavella settled her bulky figure, cast off the velvet cloak, emerged resplendent in spangled net.

"Fudge cake for all of us," she directed the little waitress, "and caramel ice-cream with chocolate sauce."

"We've had something to eat," protested Mary Ellen.

"Well, eat again," said Madame Cavella genially.

"You and your spinach! I'd starve if it wasn't for pretty Peg." She beamed at the little waitress. "Coffee all around. Real cream, Peg. None of that tinned stuff. I might as well have four chins as three." She laughed heartily and with deep enjoyment Her plump shoulders shook. The crystal pendant on the velvet band around her neck jiggled up and down.

"I'm supposed to be asleep," she continued. "The doctor said ten o'clock. But gracious, there'll be sleeping enough when I'm planted under the pansies. I like this place. All the interesting people in Mayport drift in sooner or later. I must admit I like to talk about something besides ailments and the younger generation once in a while. I'm afraid I wasn't cut out for a nice old lady. I can't seem to get enthusiastic about crochet stitches and hot-water bottles. Hello there, Johnny-boy," she called to the stout young man with the banjo. "Give us the new one."

Johnny-boy smiled broadly, strummed a rollicking air.

"He's a composer," Madame Cavella explained. "Did the music for a show last winter. He's working on another. That's one of the numbers."

Mary Ellen glanced with new interest at the stout young man.

"Do you come here every evening?" she asked.

Madame Cavella chuckled. Her eyes danced like the eyes of a mischievous child.

"I lead a double life. From supper time until ten o'clock I'm a fat old lady who sits in a rocking-chair. From ten o'clock until—oh, all hours—I am Flossie again. That keeps me on pleasant terms with life.

Don't ever lose your zest for living, Mary Ellen. If you get fat and ailments pursue you, diet at supper time to salve your conscience and dance in the evening to save your soul. Ah, that's the girl, Peggy, my love. But how about a dash of whipped cream? "

They ate quantities of fudge cake topped with whipped cream. The little waitress ran briskly back and forth, pleased to serve Madame Cavella. The stout young man with the banjo played to amuse her, the girl in the Spanish shawl strolled over to speak to her. She held high court in the coffee-house, radiating a care-free carnival spirit. She told them stories of her life with the opera company, trilled snatches of familiar music in a voice which was only the pale ghost of her famous contralto. She talked with Eric about Paris, recalled places they both had visited. He was amused, interested, delighted with Madame Cavella. Mary Ellen had never seen him so gracious to strangers. His conversation was charming. Madame Cavella was visibly impressed. Mary Ellen was proud of him, content to sit quietly beside him, her chin cupped in her hands, her eyes shining.

One of the elderly checker players wandered over to their table, paid his respects to Madame Cavella, was introduced and accepted a nail keg. He was a Captain in the British army. He had fought in fifteen wars and dined intimately with the Prince of Wales. He told fascinating stories. Some of them were rather frightful. Mary Ellen shuddered and Eric held her hand under the table. The girl who managed the coffee-house presently joined them. She had a gentle manner, beautiful eyes. She read Mary Ellen's palm, of-

fered to read Eric's but he refused. He said she was too good at it, would probably reveal some dark secret of his past. She told them about the artists who had decorated the walls, regretted that one panel was blank.

"Do you mind if I have a go at it?" Eric asked, to Mary Ellen's and probably his own surprise.

She assured him that they would be delighted. The little waitress brought him a stick of charcoal, held the candle to light the blank panel. Eric placed a nail keg in the center of the room and asked Mary Ellen to sit there. He changed her position a number of times, was finally satisfied, began to stroke lines on the panel.

Mary Ellen felt a little embarrassed but very proud. Everybody watched Eric, her Eric, stroking lines on the wall. He was apparently unconscious of the audience but when his eyes met hers she detected in them an expression half pleased, half ashamed. "He's balancing a peanut on his nose," she thought, "to please me."

"All right, Mary Ellen," he said after a while. "You can squirm now all you like."

She glanced at the panel expecting to find it completed.

"Where's the picture?" she asked.

"I'll do it to-morrow. That is only your bones."

He asked the girl with the beautiful eyes if he might return in the morning. She told him the door was always open, and thanked him for his interest in the coffee-house. Madame Cavella was surprised, visibly impressed.

"I didn't know you were an artist," she said to Eric.

"I'm not." Again the half-pleased, half-ashamed expression crept into his eyes. He looked like a little boy caught doing a kind deed. "I'll probably ruin the panel."

But Mary Ellen knew that he was pleased and excited, grateful because his fingers had not forgotten their skill. And there in the coffee-house, in the midst of the chattering voices, the strumming banjo, the flickering candle-light she breathed a brief but very fervent prayer . . . "Dear God, keep Eric always as happy as he is to-night." . . .

They walked home with Madame Cavella through the cool, star-showered night.

"Don't give me away," she coaxed. "Just fancy what Mrs. Smithers would say. My reputation with her is none too good. She is suspicious of people who enjoy life. She thinks I'm fond of the flesh pots and doomed to everlasting destruction. Well, perhaps I am but, somehow, I'm not sorry."

Mary Ellen smiled and promised, gave Madame Cavella's plump arm a reassuring squeeze.

They sat in the hammock behind the screen of vines on the veranda, heard Madame Cavella creep upstairs with the exaggerated caution of a boarding-school girl returning from a forbidden frolic.

"She's a darling, isn't she?" said Mary Ellen.

"A very interesting person," Eric answered. "She makes you feel that life isn't so dreary after all. The ability to make people happy is a priceless gift. You have it, Mary Ellen."

"Not always, Eric."

"No one can live on the mountain tops always,

darling. I hate these cheerful cherubs, these determined Pollyannas. They're stupid, insufferable."

"I know," Mary Ellen smiled. "The sort of people who want to make you cheer up when you are enjoying a nice comfortable cry."

"Do you ever cry?"

"Often."

"When?"

"When I'm sad or very happy. When the moon shines over the harbor, when the chimes play 'My Old Kentucky Home.' But it's soon over. I never manage to be miserable very long."

"You're like an April day. Tears and smiles. I think that's what makes you so sweet. The girl with the April heart."

"That's lovely, Eric. But sometimes I worry."

"What about?"

"I'm sure I can't be half as nice as you think I am. I'm afraid sometime you'll be disappointed."

"I don't think so. I like everything that I know about you, every mood, every gesture, every thought that slips into your mind. Do I know all your thoughts, Mary Ellen?"

"Not quite." She smiled.

"What was that one?" Eric asked.

"It's private."

"Please tell me."

"You'll laugh."

"No I won't. Cross my heart."

"I was thinking how proud I was this evening when you sketched on the coffee-house wall and everybody watched you."

"Were you proud?"

"Very proud. I was afraid I should crow. That would have been dreadful. Think how mortified I would have been!"

"What a gesture! I was balancing a peanut on my nose."

"It was a nice peanut."

"I thought it might amuse you. Funny. A year ago I would have suffered myself to be shot at sunrise before I'd have done a thing like that. I hated people. I shut myself into an armor of indifference, a heavy dismal thing. You've changed all that. I wake up in the morning glad I'm alive. I'm interested in things all day long, sailing, sketching . . . you. The only time I'm unhappy is when I must leave you in the evening. You're making me over."

"I don't want to make you over."

"Why not?"

"Because," she answered slowly, "I like you just as you are."

"Sweet!"

His arms closed about her, her head dropped against his shoulder. And the whispering leaves on the veranda vines, the waves washing against the wall at the end of the lawn, the wind in the top of the trees sang together, "Sweet . . . Sweet . . . Sweet! . . .

* * * * * * * *

Madame Cavella heard the soft creaking of the hammock chains. She stood at her window gazing out into the night. She felt young and slim and romantic.

She fancied that it was she who sat behind the veranda vines folded closely in arms that were ardent and young. Words half forgotten slipped into her mind. . . . "You're like a white rose, Flossie. . . . A rose with a golden heart. . . ." She lifted her hands to caress an invisible face, saw them clearly outlined in the moonlight. Old hands, puffy, the knuckles lost in cushions of flesh. She sighed. The wistful sound merged into a chuckle.

"You're an old fool, Flossie Jones," she told herself. "It's a good thing you lost your figure or you'd probably be making a spectacle of yourself in your decent old age."

And the hands that had lifted to caress the face of a half-forgotten lover, lifted a little higher, wound a strand of gray hair around a tin curling pin.

XII

MARY ELLEN snuffed out the streaming ribbon of candle-light, snuggled down under the covers, pulled the patchwork quilt up under her chin. She closed her eyes but not to sleep. The events of the evening trooped through her mind. She liked to think them over in the drowsy interval between waking and sleep. It was a sort of tidying process. She sorted over the impressions accumulated during the day, discarded some, packed others into their proper pigeonholes. The nicest ones she folded into the secret treasure chest which was hidden not in her mind but in her heart. Then everything was in good shape to receive a new store of impressions. She had devised this system of mental house cleaning when she was a little girl. The habit persisted. Sometimes it had been a dull and uninspiring task. The items to be sorted had been stupid things such as the discovery that little boys could not sit still in school; that the mud in the Cherry Hill road was thicker and more unpleasant than any other mud in the whole state of Massachusetts; that her last winter's dress would do for another season if it were dyed and disguised with new buttons. This summer, however, the nightly house cleaning had been not a task but a delight. So many lovely things to gloat over and fold away, so many additions to the treasure box! If it had not been a very accommodating box indeed it must long ago have burst its bonds.

She recalled the conversation on the rocks, Eric's

voice, the music of the bells drifting across the harbor. . . . "Weep no more, my lady. . . . Oh weep no more to-day" . . . The boy who died, the boy who believed in things, who thought the world was a pleasant place. . . . But he had not died. He had been sleeping. . . . She was bringing him back to life! (Ah, there was a thought for the treasure box.) Eric had been hurt. Someone had shattered his brightest dreams, taken away his confidence, his ambition. . . . A girl. . . . The girl he had thought was Wendy, the girl who had grown weary of the music of his pipes, danced off to a livelier tune, left the lonesome look in his gold-flecked eyes. . . . She hated that girl and was sorry for her. How could she have dreamed that in all the world there was a more delightful place than Eric's house in the treetops. . . . He must have loved her very much if after five years her picture had the power to torture him.

Eric had not told her but she knew that the girl in the broad-brimmed hat was the girl he had thought was Wendy. . . . She was beautiful. She probably had never struggled with bad boys in a country school, washed dishes, worn home-made clothes. . . . Mary Ellen sighed. A wee cloud of depression settled over her heart. How could she hope to destroy that image? . . . Little Mary Ellen, not very pretty, not very wise, who had never traveled beyond the rim of the New England hills, who made her own frocks, trimmed her own hats. . . . But Eric was happier. (A beautiful thought for the treasure box.) Not once since that wretched "Blue Mon-

day" had the troubled expression shadowed his eyes, not once had he tramped off into a far distant country leaving her behind forlorn and unhappy. She tramped with him now and all the roads were pleasant. (That to be gloated over, laid very carefully in the box.)

She thought of the coffee-house down by the wharf. The little waitress named Peggy. Cunning. . . . Eric sketching to amuse her, balancing a peanut on his nose. (The lid of the treasure box must not yet be closed.) She had never seen him so happy, so gracious to strangers. How delightfully he talked! She had been proud of him. Almost she had crowed. Her Eric entertaining the coffee-house guests! . . . Nice. . . . She thought of the stout young man with the banjo. "Johnny-boy," Madame Cavella had called him. . . . Dear Madame Cavella! Pleasant to grow old that way, to keep one's zest for living. (That item she tucked away in the pigeonhole labeled "Useful Information.") The girl in the Spanish shawl who sat beneath the mermaid panel. . . . Pretty. . . . The shawl recalled Lita.

Mary Ellen felt a pang of remorse. Lita had complained that evening of a headache, said she was going early to bed. She should have stopped in Lita's room to see if she wanted anything. Might do it now. . . . So drowsy, so warm beneath the silken patchwork quilt. . . . Lita was probably sleeping. Her door had been closed when Mary Ellen came upstairs. Lita's door was frequently closed now. She spent a great many hours alone, remote, absorbed in her own affairs. Jerry appeared to be worried. When he was with her he

looked anxious; when he was alone he looked like Hamlet. Poor Jerry! Good, clean-cut and faithful but not very exciting. He followed Lita like an ambling St. Bernard in pursuit of a scarlet tanager. Why did so many people put their happiness in the wrong hands? . . . Careless hands, heedless of their power to crush and destroy. (A thought to be filed in the compartment labeled "Who Knows?") She thought of Lolly and Joe Bandarra. . . . Joe dancing with Lita beneath the paper roses in the Easter Haven dance hall; Lolly watching them, fear in her eyes. . . . Cruel Lita to flaunt her elegance, to make Lolly look as tawdry as last year's Christmas tinsel. . . . She must talk to Lita. . . . If she did she would probably be snubbed for her pains. . . . None of her business. . . . She was getting as bad as Mrs. Smithers. Poking into other people's affairs. (Surely that belonged in the pigeonhole labeled "Things to be Avoided at Any Cost.") Lita could take care of herself. But Lolly! Lovely impudent Lolly with the shadow of fear in her eyes. . . .

The town clock struck midnight. . . . Too sleepy to house-clean any longer. . . . The wind blew in through the window, lifted the corners of the patchwork quilt. What if the quilt should sail away with her over the roofs, the masts, the steeples to some far land beyond the rim of the world? Eric wanted to take her there. . . . A new country. . . . Nothing to remind them of the past, no squirrel coats, no violets, no slippers with sparkling heels. . . . Why did those things annoy him? . . . Violets were lovely, slippers with sparkling heels. . . .

The girl on the crumpled fragment of newspaper with her slanting eyes, her cool, mocking smile. . . . "She wouldn't wear a dress made of maple leaves. She wanted diamond buttons." . . . Eric amusing the oldest Peterson, talking to her, asking her to understand. . . . She did understand. . . . Eric! . . . Of what importance were slippers with sparkling heels? She would follow him gladly in sandals made of goatskin, in felt bedroom slippers, in no shoes at all. . . . Perhaps. . . . Sometime. . . . If she kept her rose-colored glasses brightly polished. . . . "The girl with the April heart." . . . Sweet. . . . Her thoughts became less distinct. The wind lifted the corners of the quilt with a soft silken swish. The leaves outside the window brushed against the screen. Mary Ellen drifted across a calm sea into the far haven of dreams.

She dreamed that she sailed away on the patchwork quilt, out of the window, over the roofs, the trees. It was a delightful sensation. Like flying. She picked a cluster of blossoms from the top of the Tree of Heaven, fastened them in her hair. Higher and faster sailed the quilt. The moon challenged it to a race and was woefully outdistanced. Pleasant to fly, to run away from the moon, to peep in the lighthouse window. On and on sailed the quilt. The stars saw it coming and scurried out of the way. Strange music sounded in her ears. The chimes? No . . . It was lighter, showers of silver notes. Were the stars singing? Lovely the singing of a star. . . . She bent her head to listen, was astonished to discover that it was not music, but voices—two voices—people talking.

Where? She peered over the edge of the quilt. Darkness below, utter darkness. The voices persisted. Someone laughed. . . . She felt that she must find out who it was. She leaned far over the edge of the quilt, slipped, clutched for it, missed, felt herself falling . . . down . . . down . . . down. . . .

Mary Ellen opened her eyes with a start. She lay in her own familiar bed. The patchwork quilt was in its accustomed place. Dreaming! She smiled, closed her eyes, fell into a doze. Again the sound of voices roused her. She sat up, instantly wide awake. It wasn't a dream. Someone was talking beneath her window. That was curious. She glanced at her watch. Quarter of one. Who could be talking beneath her window at quarter of one? She tossed back the covers, walked to the window, looked out. The sound of voices had died away. There was no one in sight. Perhaps she had fancied it, after all. She stood for a moment at the window. What a beautiful night! Moonlight lay like pools of silver on the shadowy lawn. She thought it might be pleasant to slip out of doors, to sit in the moonlight on the steps at the edge of the lawn. Lovely nights should not be wasted in sleeping. She found her slippers, donned a quilted kimono, crept cautiously downstairs and out on the veranda.

The night was very still. There was no sound save the gentle lapping of waves against the wall. Mary Ellen stood for a moment on the veranda, looked out across the lawn. The familiar scene was transformed by the magic of moonlight into a fairyland of black

and silver. She wished Eric were there to share with her the beauty of the night. Perhaps he was at that very moment gazing out from his tower window. Perhaps he was wishing too. She blew a kiss at the shadow-smudged island and started to cross the lawn.

A rustle, a low murmur of voices broke the stillness. Mary Ellen halted abruptly and glanced back toward her house. Her eyes widened incredulously; she uttered a little sound of dismay. There in the shadow of the kitchen porch were Lita and Joe Bandarra locked in an ardent embrace.

XIII

THE midnight adventure troubled Mary Ellen, caused her to lie awake a long while that night. She could not banish from her mind the scene she had witnessed, Lita and Joe Bandarra swaying toward each other in the shadow of the kitchen porch. If Lita had not been wearing her cream-colored coat, if the moon had not shone so brightly, she might not have noticed. But Lita was wearing the cream-colored coat and the moon shone very brightly. Mary Ellen could not help but see though she had looked away after that first startled glance and hurried into the house. One o'clock! And Lita had complained of a headache, said she was going to bed early! Perhaps Lita slipped out to meet Joe Bandarra every evening after the household had retired. They certainly had seemed to know each other rather well. The thought distressed her. Lita and Joe Bandarra!

A thousand worries flocked through her mind. How distressed Aunt Ella would be if Lita should become entangled in some mad escapade. She had been entrusted to Aunt Ella's care. Always something to fret about. Mary Ellen wondered if she should speak to Lita. After all it was none of her business. If Lita chose to amuse herself in that furtive fashion, it was her privilege to do so. But what about Lolly? Such a muddle! Mary Ellen tossed restlessly. None of her business. Lita was accustomed to having her own way. If she had taken it into her head to carry on a

secret flirtation with Joe Bandarra all the king's horses and all the king's men could not stop her. Better not to say anything. Lita was able to take care of herself. Foolish to worry. She hushed the voice of anxiety and thought about pleasant things until at last she went to sleep.

But the voice of anxiety would not be permanently hushed. It spoke to her the next morning, clamored in her ears. She watched Aunt Ella moving briskly about the kitchen and thought how unhappy she would be if anything happened to Lita. Dear Aunt Ella! Mary Ellen made up her mind that she must talk to Lita. It was a duty. She nerved herself to perform it. Lita had not come down for breakfast. Apparently she intended to take a holiday from art school. Mary Ellen determined on diplomacy. She prepared a breakfast tray.

"What's that for?" asked Aunt Ella.

"I'm afraid Lita is ill. She had a headache last night."

"Dear! Dear!" murmured Aunt Molly. . . . "Perhaps I'd best go up and see."

"Never mind. I'll call you if she needs anything." Mary Ellen departed with the tray, resentment at Lita mounting in her heart.

The door at the top of the third floor stairs was closed. Mary Ellen set the tray on the landing and knocked. There was no answer. She opened the door. Lita was fast asleep, her cheek cuddled against her hand, one shoulder banded with a strap of cherry-colored ribbon emerging from the covers. Mary Ellen stood at the foot of the bed, gazed at her intently.

Lita looked so young when she was asleep. That childish gesture, her cheek against her hand. The smooth oval of her face, the long dark lashes, the hair brushed back from her brow combined to make a touching picture of innocence asleep. Mary Ellen felt her resentment melting away. She stayed it with the reflection that the innocent lashes veiled sophisticated eyes, that children did not wear black lace nightgowns with cherry-colored straps. She removed a curious assortment of objects from the table beside the bed, set the tray upon it and jerked up the window shade to admit a stream of sunlight.

The dark lashes quivered, reluctantly parted. Lita blinked sleepily, discovered Mary Ellen and the tray. She smiled and languidly turned her head.

"What is it?" she asked patting back a yawn. "Christmas or somebody's birthday?"

"It's half-past ten," said Mary Ellen. "I thought perhaps you were ill."

"Ill," repeated Lita. "What about?"

"You said last night you had a headache."

"Oh!" Lita seemed to be recalling something which had happened a long while ago. "It's all right now."

"That's good," said Mary Ellen brightly. "You might as well have some breakfast anyway."

"You're an angel. I'm starved." Lita sat up against the pillows and buttered a square of toast.

Mary Ellen sat on the edge of the bed.

"Would you rather have had marmalade?" she asked searching about in her mind for a method of attack.

"I love raspberry jam." Lita plunged a spoon into the jam pot.

"Sleep well?" asked Mary Ellen.

"Great!" answered Lita, her mouth agreeably full. "Did you?" she added politely.

"Not very. I was restless."

"Too bad." Lita sipped her coffee serenely.

"It was a beautiful night," said Mary Ellen.

"Was it?"

"I went out on the lawn—about one o'clock." Mary Ellen searched Lita's countenance for signs of guilt and found none. It was as bland and guileless as that of a trusting child.

"Have a good time?"

"I discovered something."

"Meaning which?" drawled Lita.

"Your flannel coat," continued Mary Ellen indicating a crumpled object on a near-by chair, "is not a suitable garment for a midnight rendezvous—that is, if you don't want anyone to see you."

"Now you're getting to the point." Lita smiled. "I wondered how long it would take. So you saw me last night with the boy friend?"

Mary Ellen nodded and looked as severe as possible.

"The moon was beautiful." Lita refilled her cup from the silver pot. "Too nice to sleep."

"You didn't intend to sleep," said Mary Ellen severely.

"Well, now that you mention it, I think you're right."

"You said you had a headache."

"My mistake. I should have thought up a better

one than that." She continued to sip the coffee. Her eyes, mocking, amused, the least bit defiant, smiled at Mary Ellen over the rim of the cup.

"Where did you go?"

"Over to the Casino."

"With Joe Bandarra?"

"Himself. Sweet Aunt Susan, how that boy can dance! We won a prize. If you'll look in the pocket of my coat, you'll find an aluminum vanity case full of pink powder and brick-dust rouge."

"You know Joe's a Portuguese," ventured Mary Ellen.

"What of it? That doesn't put lead in his shoes. Besides I like foreigners." A dreamy expression banished the mocking light in her eyes. "Don't you adore to have your hand kissed, Mary Ellen?"

"That depends upon who does the kissing. I don't think I'd enjoy it if it were done by a professional kisser of hands."

"Practice makes perfect," quoth Lita lightly. "Amateurs are so clumsy. There's Jerry, for instance ——" She shrugged the cherry-colored strap off her shoulder.

"Jerry's nice," Mary Ellen insisted.

"He bores me to death. Always talking about bungalow aprons and kitchen stoves. Imagine me making biscuits!"

"I can't," said Mary Ellen and she added gravely, "I don't think Aunt Ella would like you to go to dances with Joe."

"Are you going to scold?" Lita smiled engagingly over the rim of the cup.

"You deserve it."

"Now see here, little white lamb. Don't you worry about me. I know my way around. Besides that I know all about the handsome boy friend. He's wild and he's dashing, a regular village Don Juan. He's more or less engaged to the girl with red hair and the weird taste in perfume. But he is amusing. He sometimes trips up on his pronouns but never on the dance floor. He has the most marvelous eyes I ever saw off the movie screen but after all, he's nothing in my young life, grandmother, except a pair of dancing feet. Stop frowning. It spoils your pretty face."

Mary Ellen smiled and felt immensely relieved. Lita couldn't be falling in love with Joe Bandarra or she would not be able to discuss him so airily. He was merely a diversion, a pair of dancing feet. What was a kiss in the moonlight? To Lita it was only one more kiss. Foolish to worry. She drew a long, long sigh of relief.

"It's hard to scold you," she said.

"Now that's all over," said Lita cheerfully, "I'll tell you something amusing. Last night Joe and I were invited to dance at the artists' ball. What do they call it?"

"The Fakirs' Frolic, you mean?"

"Something like that. A man asked us last night. Thrilling?"

"It will be fun."

"Do you go?"

"I never have. It's given by the artists. I'm a 'native,' you know."

"Eric will take you."

"Perhaps." Mary Ellen's eyes sparkled at the thought.

"We'll do a tango. It's only a week off. I'll have to find a costume. Will you help me?"

Mary Ellen promised. They plunged into a discussion of costumes which lasted until dinner time. Lita seemed interested in nothing but her approaching performance. Mary Ellen's last little worry vanished. No, not quite the last. There remained hidden away in her mind a little worry for Lolly who might not be so pleased to have Joe dancing with Lita. But the summer was nearly over. In two more weeks Lita would return to New York and that would be that. She hoped Lolly would not be hurt. And Jerry—Oh dear! Life was confusing. No matter how carefully things were arranged someone was bound to be hurt. . . .

She forgot even to worry for Lolly. Eric came at dinner time. His hair was rumpled, his tie askew. There were streaks of paint on his trousers.

"You're painting the panel in the coffee-house," said Mary Ellen as soon as she saw him.

"How did you know?"

"Your hair is rumpled."

"Of course. I ought to wear a skull cap."

"Or a tam-o'-shanter. I thought all artists did."

"I'm not an artist." He smiled. "I'm merely making a gesture to amuse you. Balancing a peanut on my nose."

"Funny!"

"Will you come over this afternoon and watch me paint?"

"Do you need me?"

"I always need you." His voice was gentle, his gold-flecked eyes smiled at her.

"To pose, I mean," said Mary Ellen.

"No. This isn't a portrait. It's just for fun. I'm slapping on paint at a furious rate."

"Then I'd better help Ruby. She's making jelly this afternoon."

"I'll miss you."

"Me too!"

"And you a school teacher!" teased Eric. "I think the directors should be informed."

"Will you come and tell me as soon as you've finished?" asked Mary Ellen.

"The very minute." Her hand lay in his for a brief happy moment. Then Ruby appeared in the doorway, and swung the dinner bell vigorously.

"The call of the kitchen! Good-bye, Eric. You'll let me know when it's finished."

"Immediately. Good-bye, pretty girl."

He strode off around the corner of the house. Heedless of the call of the dinner bell Mary Ellen lingered on the veranda; listened to the singing of the birds in her heart. Worries had long ago vanished. Lita and Lolly were shadows. When Eric was with her everyone else in the world was a shadow. . . . Lita. . . . Lolly. . . . Silly to fret about other people's affairs. . . . That lock of hair standing up at the back of his head. . . . Funny! . . . Sweet! . . .

"My happy day, Mary Ellen!" Ruby, too substantial for a shadow, loomed in the doorway. "Do

you want the soup to freeze to the plates? I'm glad to say love never went to my head! "

* * * * * * * *

The jelly was firm and cold before Eric returned. Mary Ellen was hanging the dish towels on the rack behind the stove when she heard him speak to Grandfather on the kitchen porch. She dropped the last towel and rushed to the door.

" Is it finished? "

" Yes and I'm starving."

" Haven't you had anything to eat? "

" Some crackers and a crumb or two of sponge cake."

" Is that all! " exclaimed Aunt Ella. " Come right in here."

He obeyed with alacrity, pulled up a chair to the kitchen table.

" You don't mind the kitchen? " asked Aunt Ella bustling about to take care of Eric.

" I like kitchens," he answered, " and I haven't seen a real one for years."

" You don't say! " fluttered Aunt Molly. " Well, that's too bad. Seems as though folks have missed a lot who don't eat in the kitchen once in a while." And she trotted off to get him a napkin, her best knife and fork, and the spoon with " Molly " engraved in the bowl.

Aunt Ella and Ruby produced enough food to feed a dozen famished refugees. And Ruby, who admired Eric immensely, opened a jar of the new jelly though she had refused to give Grandfather even a taste for supper. Observing that Eric was in kindly and ca-

pable hands Mary Ellen went upstairs to change her dress. When she returned he was combing his hair in front of the kitchen mirror and sending Ruby into gales of hilarity with his nonsense.

"I got a stitch in my side from laughin'! " she gasped. "He's more fun than a circus! "

"Thank you," said Eric and smiled at the mirth-stricken Ruby. "That's a real compliment. I have an enormous admiration for circuses. The only thing I like better is Mary Ellen in that strawberry ice-cream dress." And he looked at her so admiringly that Ruby was overcome. She vanished into the pantry and dropped a sentimental tear on the jelly jars.

"Can I see the panel? " asked Mary Ellen. "Right now? "

"Not until after dark. It will be nicer by candle-light. I hope you won't be disappointed. Will you like me just as well if the peanut falls off? "

"Of course. . . . Silly! "

"What! "

"I mean . . . darling! "

"That's better. I don't approve of disrespect from children." He kissed her right there in the kitchen with Aunt Molly moving around in the next room. Ruby popped her head through the pantry door in time to witness the scene. She promptly popped it back in again and dropped another tear on the jelly jars.

They sat on the kitchen porch with Grandfather to wait until it should grow dark. The old man pointed an accusing finger at the heap of paint tubes and brushes that Eric had left on the step.

"Belong to you?" he asked.

Eric admitted that they did.

"You one of these everlastin' artists?"

Eric confessed that he sometimes sketched a bit.

"Blamed if I ain't lost all faith in human nature," sputtered Capt'n Hollis. "Time was when I could judge a man or a boat first off without any mistake. Durned if I hadn't set you down for a sensible party. What you want to mess with that stuff for?"

Eric explained that he enjoyed it.

"Well, everyone to his own tastes." Grandfather shook his head. "But it's considerable of a disappointment to me. I thought you'd be too much of a man to waste time daubin' up canvas as ought to be used for sails. I don't know as I'm willin' Mary Ellen should be friends with you now that I've found out what kind of a feller you are." He scowled fiercely but Mary Ellen saw that his eyes were twinkling beneath the bristling brows.

"Isn't it possible to be a man and an artist at the same time?" Eric asked.

"It don't generally work out that way. From what I've noticed the fellers that paint pictures had ought to wear petticoats. There was one here last summer that sprayed himself with perfumery. Durned if he didn't smell like a funeral wreath. He crooked his little finger when he drank out of a cup and I don't doubt he wore tattin' on his underwear."

Eric laughed.

"Not guilty, Capt'n Hollis," he said.

"Well I should hope you ain't. But you better look out. Seems like it gets 'em sooner or later. Sam

Arnold's boy was a nice enough young feller 'til he went off to art school in the city. Durned if he ain't a he dressmaker now. Wears pink shirts and calls himself Madame somebody or other. Poor Sam's that mortified he don't take any comfort in life. Still I reckon there's hope for you. Anybody that can handle a sailboat the way you do ain't likely to turn into a droopin' lily. But you stick to the boats, son. They're a heap more satisfyin' than daubs of paint."

"I'm fond of boats," said Eric, "and I promise you I won't turn into a drooping lily. I'd like to make a sketch of you, if you don't mind."

"Mind!" fumed Grandfather. "Why, I'd be the laughin' stock of the whole town. Posin' at my age! If Sam Arnold and the other old timers should hear of it, I'm feared they'd come over and kiss me. By Godfrey! Posin' for a picture at my age! I'd as soon take dancin' lessons!"

He scowled very fiercely indeed but Mary Ellen suspected that he was pleased. She was sure of it when the old man said as they rose to leave the porch:

"Don't know but I'd as soon have you make my picture as anybody. Do you reckon you could do it somewheres in private? Over on the island, say. If anybody was to catch on, I'd never live it down and I'm an old man to have my head bowed low with disgrace. By Godfrey! I ain't sure but I'd like to see what kind of a picture you'd make of a seamed old chart like mine!"

Eric promised him that no one should know unless he wished. They left the old man flattered and pleased, softly chuckling.

"Shall we take Madame Cavella?" Eric asked.

"She'd love it. Do you mind, Eric?"

"I like her."

"She's a darling," Mary Ellen agreed.

So they asked Madame Cavella and because Miss Lillie Belle was sitting beside her on the veranda, they asked her too. Mr. Jackson came out of the house just then and was invited to join the party. Jerry's roadster was drawn up at the curb. He and Lita were about to drive off. Mary Ellen asked them if they would like to visit the coffee-house. They scrambled out of the car and joined the procession.

"Good grief!" moaned Eric. "It looks like a parade!"

"Do you mind?" asked Mary Ellen anxiously.

"Why don't you blow the fire whistle? There may be a few people in Mayport who aren't with us."

"Do you mind, Eric? . . . Really?"

"Lord no! I'm teasing you. It's your peanut anyway." And he drew her hand through his arm.

There were no guests in the coffee-house. The little waitress named Peggy and the girl with the beautiful eyes were making sandwiches in the tiny kitchen. They came out to welcome the visitors. Someone lighted candles, many candles, placed them on a table beneath the panel. Mary Ellen looked, felt a lump in her throat, tears on her lashes. Lovely! Was she as pretty as that? Eric had painted the doorway of Tarpaper Palace, the step, the trailing trumpet vines and on the step the figure of a girl with long fair braids falling over her shoulders, a cluster of scarlet berries fastened in her hair. She wore a moss-green skirt, a tight green

bodice buttoned with acorns. She was sewing on something which vaguely resembled a gentleman's shirt. Her head drooped slightly, dark lashes curled against her cheeks, a lovely, secret smile curved her painted lips. Below the painting a name was traced in letters as delicate as grape-vine tendrils and the name was . . . "Wendy."

"Like it?" asked Eric softly.

"It's lovely!" She whispered under a chorus of admiring exclamations led by Miss Lillie Belle's flute like voice. "It's like looking into an enchanted mirror which makes you beautiful. Am I as pretty as that?"

"Much prettier. That's badly done. No subtlety. I'll do it on canvas sometime and then you'll know how lovely you are. I can do it, Mary Ellen. I haven't quite forgotten."

And the happy confident tone of his voice pleased her as much as the painting. She slipped her hand through the curve of his arm, smiled up at him with shining eyes.

Everyone admired the panel. Madame Cavella thumped Eric heartily upon the back. Lita and Jerry marveled, very much impressed. Miss Lillie Belle fluttered like a purple striped morning-glory in a raging gale, informed the assembled company that she had suspected Eric was an important person. She spoke of the encounter on the Rockville dock but hesitated to mention the loss of her slipper. It hardly seemed proper since there were gentlemen present. . . . Mr. Jackson discussed technical points, spoke knowingly of tone and perspective. The little waitress looked at Eric with round admiring eyes, said his was

the nicest panel in the coffee-house. The girl with the gentle manner thanked him for his addition to their collection and asked him to sign the panel. Eric looked pleased and ashamed and rather uncomfortable. "I hate to be pawed in public," he whispered to Mary Ellen. She patted his arm reassuringly and was very, very proud.

They gathered about a table. The little waitress served fudge cake and coffee in honor of the occasion. Madame Cavella called for ginger ale, proposed a number of amusing toasts to Eric, to Mary Ellen and the success of the coffee-house. Miss Lillie Belle declared over and over again that it was no more than she had expected and Lita commissioned Eric to do her portrait at once. It was all very gay and exciting. Mary Ellen was sure that life could hold in store for her no moment more thrilling. She sat on a nail keg beside Eric, starry-eyed, ecstatic and felt that she must positively crow.

Someone called attention to a poster announcing the Fakirs' Frolic. The conversation veered to a discussion of the event. Mr. Jackson invited Miss Lillie Belle to accompany him. She accepted prettily, chattered of frocks and frills, of powdered wigs and beauty patches.

"Want to go?" Eric asked Mary Ellen.

"I'd love it!" Her eyes sparkled more brightly than ever, outshone the jets of candle-light. "I've never been to a costume dance in my life."

"Poor little girl!"

"Other years I peeped through the windows. It looked lovely. But Eric, what could I wear?"

"Leave that to me. I'll wire a friend of mine in New York."

"Do you want to go?"

"If it will please you."

"You're a very nice person."

"So are you!" His hand found hers under the table, imprisoned it warmly. And Mary Ellen was sure that if Heaven were any nicer than the coffee-house she wouldn't be able to bear it.

Presently the British captain who had fought in eighteen wars wandered in. Madame Cavella hailed him to make a fourth at bridge. Eric and Mary Ellen departed with Lita and Jerry. They rode around the cape in Jerry's car. The wind was crisp and invigorating. It sang in their ears, tousled their hair, made their faces tingle. The sky was sown as thickly with stars as a June meadow with daisy disks. Above them sailed the crescent moon. Lovely night! Mary Ellen cuddled in the curve of Eric's arm, her cheek against his shoulder, her hand held tightly in his. Happy. . . . So happy. . . .

And later, much later, that evening she folded away in the treasure box the nicest thought of all, a thought which made her heart beat rapidly, and warmed her cheeks with a wild rose flush; for it assured her that Eric had no intention of wandering off without her when the summer was over.

"That panel in the coffee-house isn't good," he said as they sat in the hammock behind the veranda vines. "Sometime I'll do a gorgeous painting of you, Mary Ellen."

* * * * * * * *

"Ella!"

"Yes, Molly."

"You asleep?"

"Not yet."

"Do you reckon Eric aims to marry Mary Ellen?"

"Gracious! I never thought of such a thing!"

"They're together 'most all the time."

"She's nothin' but a child."

"You were married at her age and I'd have been too if John had come back."

"Eric treats her same as if she was ten years old. I been watchin'. I don't think he has any such notion in his head."

"Would you be pleased if 'twas to happen?"

"I don't know. I always hoped she'd marry Jim Mason. He's a good boy. Seems as though folks are happier if they stick to their own kind."

"Jim Mason's not Mary Ellen's kind. 'Twould be like hitchin' a race boat to a scow."

"Jim's steady. He'll be well off some day."

"Mary Ellen needs more than that. She's high spirited—like Bessie. I want she should be happy."

"I want that too, Molly. But we don't know much about Eric."

"I like him. If John had lived and we'd had a son, I'd have been pleased to have him like Eric."

"He's real pleasant—but I don't know. . . ."

"You wouldn't make any objection if he should want to marry her, would you, Ella?"

"Not if I was satisfied 'twas all right."

"We've not had much happiness, you and Bessie and I. Perhaps it's all been saved up for Mary Ellen."

"Perhaps . . . though I'm not complainin'. Folks make their own happiness, seems to me."

"In a way. But life's a long time to be lonesome in. That's why I want Mary Ellen to be happy."

"I shan't put any objections in her way. Eric would take her away from us. But that's to be expected. You can't keep them forever. It's right that it should be so. Now you get some sleep. . . . It'll be six o'clock before we know it."

"If 'twas to happen, I'd want Mary Ellen to wear my weddin' dress. Seems as though I shouldn't mind so much if it made her happy. . . . Well, good-night, Ella."

"Good-night, Molly. . . . Pleasant dreams."

XIV

"FATE chooses the happiest moment to deal her deadliest blow." Where had she heard that? Mary Ellen could not remember but the words drummed through her mind until even the wheels of the car seemed to turn in time to the dismal refrain. The happiest moment! That was right. She had been happy, breathlessly, rapturously happy. Now it was all over. She was riding home with Jerry, miserable and unhappy, watching with misted eyes the winding white ribbon of road. An hour ago they had been riding in the opposite direction. Only an hour ago—but how different that ride had been. Then the little waitress, Peggy, in her blue velvet trousers and golden wig had sat next to Jerry. Johnny-boy, his round ruddy face beaming like a full moon above a fluted satin frill, had been mounted upon the folded back top. She had sat on Eric's knees because the car was crowded, had felt his arms folded around her, rested her head against his shoulder. Johnny-boy sang. Peggy sang with him in a clear sweet childish voice. Jerry sang too, rumbled a lusty bass in spite of the fact that after her dance Lita had disappeared with Joe Bandarra. And the stars high up in the heavens had twinkled at them, the wind had tossed their hair, the moon had risen from the sea to light their journey.

Only an hour ago! Now she sat a miserable little heap in the far corner of the wide leather seat with

Jerry, sympathetic, mercifully silent, beside her. Johnny-boy was playing his banjo in that long candle-lighted room at the end of the cape. Peggy was dancing, her small patent leather slippers twinkling in the firelight. And Eric—where was he? In that other room, staring with tortured eyes at the portrait of a girl in a silver gown. Only an hour ago he had held her in his arms, whispered dear foolish things in her ear. Now he was standing in that strange doorway as silent, as grim, as coldly chiseled as the bronze soldier in the post-office square. . . .

"Cold, Mary Ellen?" Jerry asked.

"No. . . . No, Jerry. I'm not cold."

"There's a blanket in back."

"Never mind. I'm all right." . . .

The happiest moment! She had been happy. The Fakirs' Frolic had been lovely. She liked the colored lanterns, the banks of evergreen, the balloons drifting like dyed soap bubbles across the ceiling. She liked the orchestra dressed in clown suits, the funny fat drummer who tossed his sticks into the air and caught them again without breaking the rhythm of the music, the paper streamers, the horns, the showers of confetti. She had looked so pretty in the costume Eric ordered from New York, so pretty that she felt a little thrill of surprise each time she saw her reflection in the long mirror at the end of the dance floor. It had not seemed possible that the pretty creature dancing with Eric could be Mary Ellen. She looked far more like an illustration from an expensive story book, like the painting in the coffee-house come to life. The pretty creature wore a skirt of maple leaves, leaves touched by the frost, shot

with bronze and crimson tints; a bodice of moss-green velvet with puffy white peasant sleeves, a row of bronze acorns for buttons. Tiny green slippers of softest suede covered her feet; her slender tanned legs were bare. Twisted pale gold braids fell across her shoulders; a cluster of bitter-sweet berries was caught in her hair.

People had looked at her. Nice old ladies sitting in whispering rows along the wall had smiled as she passed. Elderly gentlemen heedless of rheumatic twinges, of the aches that would come with the morrow, asked to dance with her. They had called her "my dear," paid her elaborate, old-fashioned compliments. Other gentlemen, by no means so elderly, had "cut in," whirled her away from Eric. She danced with a spotted clown who told her she was pretty, with a Romeo in rose-colored tights who tried to impress her by quoting amorous passages from Shakespeare, with a Mexican bandit who tried to steal the cluster of bitter-sweet berries caught in her hair. To be popular had been a new experience. Like the old lady in the Mother Goose rhyme she had frequently asked herself, "Alack-a-day! And is this really I?"

How pleasant it had been to dance beneath the swaying lanterns with Eric, an unfamiliar but very handsome Eric in the regalia of a highwayman with a coat of claret velvet, a belt bristling with weapons, a knot of lace at his chin. She had been very proud of him, thought him the most striking figure in all that whirling maze of fantastic shadows. Other people thought so too. They had looked at him. Girls had smiled enticingly, fluttered their lashes; pirouetted for his

pleasure. Eric had not appeared to notice them. He had danced with no one but her. When a strange partner whirled her away he stood against the wall, watched her, waited for her with a tender amused expression in his grave dark eyes. Her Eric! How proud she had been. He whispered beautiful things to her as they danced or sat for brief intervals on the steps outside, things which made her heart beat very quickly. But he had not meant them. Not really. If he had, that dreadful, cruel thing could not have happened. . . .

"You're bouncing about so, Mary Ellen." Jerry's voice, troubled and sympathetic, roused her from a maze of chaotic thoughts.

"I'm—I'm all right, Jerry."

"Slide over here closer to me."

She obeyed like a bewildered child.

"Slip your arm through mine," Jerry directed. "And hang on tight."

She clutched his arm and was comforted a little by his friendly desire to make her comfortable.

"That better?"

"Much better, thank you."

"Hold on tight."

She did hold on tight and the friendly arm reassured her. Something to cling to in a tottering world. . . .

The happiest moment! How happy she had been when Lita danced with Joe Bandarra. It had been exciting to know that Lita was after all a relative of sorts, that she lived with her under the sloping Gray Gables roof. She recalled the panicky feeling that had

seized her when the orchestra swung into the music of a tango, the same music to which Lita had danced with Joe that morning on the dock. Suppose Lita should forget the steps! Suppose she should be nervous! Suppose the audience should not like her! She felt like that sometimes when her pet pupil stood up to "speak a piece" on Friday afternoon before company. Suppose Lita should slip and fall! She had felt that must not happen, had almost prayed, though it scarcely seemed a suitable theme for prayer, that Lita would dance well.

She need not have worried. A murmur of approval rippled through the hall when Lita and Joe glided into the amber disc of spotlight, slim, assured, smiling into each other's eyes. How beautifully they had danced! Watching them was like hearing exquisite music. Lita wore black velvet, a tight bodice with not enough back. It was cut in a deep V almost to her waist. She had been glad Mrs. Smithers was not there. The velvet made Lita's skin look like white rose petals. Her full, ankle-length skirt was lined with scarlet. It swirled delightfully when she danced. How enormous her eyes looked with the violet shadows penciled beneath them. Her lips were scarlet in the pale oval of her face. The light touched her small round head with the sheen of satin, intensified the brilliance of Joe's bold black eyes, the gleam of his flashing smile. He wore the regalia of an Argentine dancer. It had been immensely becoming. Joe was good looking but not to be trusted. She had wished that he would not look at Lita that way, had forgotten her dislike for him in the pleasure of watching them dance.

Lovely the rise and fall of Lita's scarlet slippers, the swirl of her scarlet-lined skirt. Joe swung her across his shoulder when the dance was over, carried her out of the circle of light. How the people applauded! It sounded like rain on a tin roof. They had reappeared, smiled their thanks for the applause, refused to dance again. That was like Lita. One perfect gesture. Mary Ellen remembered that she had drawn a long breath when the lights in the colored lanterns had brightened again. It was like waking up from a dream. And then she had seen Jerry standing pale and miserable on the other side of the room. He hated Lita to dance with Joe. Poor Jerry! It had occurred to her that life was very complicated. Someone seemed always to be getting hurt. But she had been so happy. She had not dreamed of the hurt that was waiting for her.

And then the dance had ended. The last notes of "Home Sweet Home" had trembled into silence. Lights had flared up, dimming the glow of the colored lanterns. Pierrot and Columbine had vanished. The Fakirs' Frolic was over. She had been sorry to have it end. She said that to Eric and he had smiled and asked her if she wanted to dance the sun up. She had thought it might be pleasant. She remembered that she had felt wound up like the Swiss dolls on Aunt Molly's music box, that she must keep on dancing until she ran down. She hadn't wanted to go home.

Then the little waitress named Peggy had appeared with a woman in silver lace and amethysts. The woman had white hair, young blue eyes, a lovely voice. Peggy said her name was Mrs. Carroll.

She told them she was having a party at her studio, asked them to come. Mary Ellen almost had held her breath while she waited to see if Eric would accept. A studio party! It sounded gay and exciting. Eric did accept. She had given his arm a grateful squeeze. Jerry was standing in the doorway. She had asked him to take them to the party in his car. He was unhappy because Lita had gone home after her dance. He had frowned and threatened to knock out most of Joe Bandarra's teeth. Finally he had consented to take them. They had crowded into his car with Peggy and Johnny-boy to show them the way. The stars had twinkled, the moon rose out of the sea. Eric had held her tight in his arms, whispered lovely things to her while the others sang silly happy songs. Nothing had warned her of the unhappiness waiting for her in Mrs. Carroll's studio at the far end of the cape. . . .

"There's an all night restaurant around the bend of the road," Jerry said. "Shall we stop for some coffee?"

"No—no, thank you, Jerry. I'd rather go home, please."

"Don't cry, Mary Ellen," he said huskily.

"I'm not crying," she answered in a small, toneless voice. "I—I can't. I feel all frozen."

He patted her hand.

"It's hell to care a lot about somebody," he mumbled.

"Yes, isn't it?" she agreed politely in the same small toneless voice. "I never thought about it before. But I suppose it is."

Jerry lapsed again into silence. Mary Ellen watched, without seeing an inch of it, the winding white road. Poor Jerry! He was unhappy too. So many people were unhappy. Life was all wrong. She clung very tightly to Jerry's arm, wished that she did not feel frozen, lifeless, numb. A snow man must feel that way. Horrid to be a snow man. But they were almost home now. She longed to crawl into her own familiar bed, to pull the patchwork quilt up under her chin, try to thaw out the frozen feeling around her heart. Almost home. . . . Her thoughts returned to the events of the evening. . . .

Mrs. Carroll's studio stood on a jutting point at the far end of the cape. It was a rambling stone building covered with vines, enclosed by a walled garden silvered and fairylike in the moonlight. They had stepped through the door into a long high ceilinged room lighted by candles, a blazing fire in an open stone fireplace. The room had seemed full of voices, of laughter, of thick smoke curls. There had been a great many people sitting on the low divans, grouped about on the floor. Most of them were in costume. The firelight, the flickering candle-light had played over Cleopatra's jewels, a crusader's coat of mail, Marie Antoinette's brocaded skirt. Everybody seemed to be talking at once. A man sat at the enormous square piano; a girl sang, for her own amusement apparently, since no one paid the least attention.

Mary Ellen remembered her first panic of shyness. She had hesitated in the doorway, dreading to meet so many strangers. But the little waitress named Peggy had been equal to the occasion. She led them to a

cushioned seat in a window alcove, settled down on the floor at their feet, pointed out the celebrities in a gay and amusing fashion that banished shyness. Mary Ellen had discovered that no one seemed inclined to bother with the formality of introductions. People had talked to her. It hadn't seemed to matter whether she knew their names or not. A boy in a smock and velvet tam-o'-shanter brought them sandwiches, tall glasses of an amber drink that tasted fizzy and pleasant.

Mrs. Carroll waved to them from the other end of the room. She moved about lighting candles, talking to people. The light had shone on her white hair, shingled and beautifully waved, had flashed glinting sparkles from her earrings, the chain of amethysts about her throat. She was a lovely person. Mary Ellen had enjoyed looking at her. She had a very nice time, sitting in the alcove between Eric and Jerry, eating sandwiches, laughing at a red-haired girl with a snake that looked almost real coiled around her arm, the pert little ballet dancer walking an invisible tight rope across the middle of the floor, balancing herself with a Japanese parasol.

Johnny-boy had played his banjo. An athletic young man had pounded the piano. Someone asked her to dance. Eric was talking about art to a nice old man with a great deal of silvery hair. Mary Ellen had accepted. She had danced with a number of people. She danced with Jerry. He scowled no longer and seemed to be enjoying the party.

It was while she was dancing with Jerry that Mrs. Carroll had crossed the room to speak to her.

"Your costume interested me at the Frolic," Mrs. Carroll had said. "I sometimes make illustrations for children's books. Once I did a set of paintings for 'Peter Pan.' Would you like to see them?"

She had led them into an adjoining room. Eric followed to the door, stood there, smoking a cigarette. The room was long, its ceiling very high. There seemed to be a great many windows. At one end beneath a skylight was a model stand. There were easels and screens, brushes standing in pottery jars.

"This is my brother's studio," Mrs. Carroll explained. "He bought it three years ago and we spend our summers here. He is in Europe now and I am alone."

She had lighted the candles in a number of bronze scones, held a candlestick of twisted silver in her hand as she led Mary Ellen and Jerry around the room.

"I like candle-light," she said. "My friends think it a queer fancy but it is, to me, a pleasant one."

Mary Ellen had wondered if it was because she knew she was lovely in the candle-light with her white hair, her young blue eyes, her glinting chain of amethysts.

The "Peter Pan" illustrations hung against the dull green wall. They were charming. There was the dog-nurse Nana with Michael on her back lumbering toward the half-open door of a bathroom; there was Peter himself, slim and cocky, lighting on the Darling's window sill. Wendy's house in Never-Never land with it silk-hat chimney was there, the redskins, the little lost boys, Captain Hook and his gallant crew. She had admired them, smiled at the crocodile, at Smee's sewing machine, the pirate ship.

"The nicest one is over here," Mrs. Carroll had said. "I think I'd better give you more light."

She had turned a switch and a row of shaded bulbs in the ceiling flooded the opposite wall with soft light. The "nicest one" had been a painting of Wendy sitting in the doorway of Peter's house in the treetops. Mary Ellen looked at it admiringly, had thought it not unlike the painting in the coffee-house. Then her eyes had strayed to a canvas hanging close by. It was the portrait of a girl in a silver gown. She had glanced at it idly at first and then with deeper interest. The face had seemed familiar, the eyes that slanted a bit at the corners, queer green-blue eyes like the pendant Miss Lillie Belle wore on a silver chain. Aquamarine. That was it. Waters of the sea. Where had she seen them before?

She had gazed at the portrait intently. The girl had smoky dark hair. It curled in two soft points against her cheeks. Her throat was slim and white. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, her chin arrogantly tilted. A cloak of squirrel fur was draped over the back of the chair, its darker gray a background for the shining silver of her gown. There was a knot of violets on her shoulder. . . . Violets. . . . Squirrel fur. . . . Suddenly Mary Ellen had remembered. It was the girl whose picture she had seen in the newspaper, the girl who had made Eric unhappy. . . . Violets. . . . Squirrel fur. . . . She knew, although she could not see them, that the girl in the portrait wore slippers with gem-studded heels. . . . That girl. . . . She had felt a bit dizzy, had grasped the back of a chair.

Mrs. Carroll noticed her interest in the portrait.

"One of my brother's former pupils did that," she had said. "It's an interesting portrait and an interesting story. The young man loaned it to my brother for an exhibition and never came back to claim it. In fact, he entirely disappeared. My brother was very much distressed. The boy was his most promising student. He was never able to find any trace of him. We brought the portrait from the New York studio here. My brother still clings to the hope that sometime he will find him.

"I never saw him," she had continued, "and I don't recall his name. He was the son of Nellie Shannon, an actress famous a number of years ago. It seems to me I have heard that she used to spend her summers in Mayport. Perhaps that is why my brother bought this studio. He was very fond of the boy. I think that," she had pointed to the girl in the silver gown with her slanting blue-green eyes, the inscrutable smile on her painted lips, "is a portrait of his wife."

Mary Ellen had felt the floor slipping away under her feet. She had clung tightly to the arm of the chair, glanced just once at Eric. He was looking intently at the portrait, a tortured expression in his eyes, as stern, as motionless as the bronze soldier in the post-office square. Then things had seemed to be blurred. She felt herself slipping down, down, down, into unfathomed depths of darkness. It was not that the girl in the silver gown had once been Eric's wife. That, strangely enough, had seemed unimportant. It was the realization that she still had the power to torture him, that the thing Eric had said should never happen again,

had happened. He had not even looked at her! She remembered the afternoon on the beach, the ride home in Jerry's car with Eric beside her, so close, yet so infinitely far away. She had felt that she could not endure another ride like that. Her one thought had been to get away before she fainted, or cried, or made a scene.

She had felt Jerry's arm around her, heard his voice. Jerry had danced her out of the room. And Eric had not noticed. He had remained motionless in the frame of that other door, stared at the portrait, his face above the knot of lace at his throat tense and drawn.

"Take me home, Jerry," she had murmured. And Jerry, dear Jerry, had found her coat, all but carried her out of the long candle-lighted room where people danced and were happy. She had not thought of saying good-night to Mrs. Carroll or to the people who had been friendly. Her one desire had been to escape, to hide her hurt in her own small room up under the Gray Gables roof. And now they were speeding along the shore road. The stars still twinkled, the moon hung round and golden in the deep blue arch of the sky, the waves crested with silver broke against the rocks. But Mary Ellen did not see them. She saw only Eric's eyes, tortured and unhappy, the grim taut line of his lips. And above the rush of the wind she heard the wheels turning in time to the weary refrain . . . "The happiest moment . . . to deal . . . the deadliest blow." . . .

They reached Gray Gables at last. Jerry walked with her to the door.

"I'm sorry, Mary Ellen," he said huskily.

"Yes, Jerry. . . . I know."

"Anything I can do?"

"No, Jerry. . . . Nothing."

"If you want to cry, I have a convenient shoulder."

"It's a nice shoulder. But I can't seem to cry."

"Don't worry. . . . Try to sleep."

"Yes, Jerry. I'll try. And thank you . . . thank you so much."

* * * * * * * *

Mary Ellen listlessly removed Wendy's skirt of maple leaves; her bodice with the puffy white peasant sleeves, the row of bronze acorns for buttons. She folded them carefully, laid them away in an empty drawer. Wendy was gone forever. Never again would she smile and sparkle or wear a cluster of bitter-sweet berries in her twisted braids. The thought provoked a torrent of tears. She slipped into bed without taking off the rest of her clothes; cried for a long time, her face buried in the pillow, her slim body shaking with sobs. The tears melted the frozen feeling around her heart, banished the hard aching lump in her throat.

Presently she felt more calm. Reason returned. She was able to think about it clearly. And the more she thought the more she blamed herself for running away. It was rude, cowardly, the sort of thing you might expect from a hysterical child. What would Eric think? How would he get home? Perhaps if she had stayed there with him she might have been able to charm away his unhappiness. It was not Eric's fault. He had never deceived her. How young and foolish and romantic she had been! Now that she

searched her memory she knew that Eric had never told her he loved her, never asked her to marry him. He was fond of her. He loved her as he loved the sun, the sea, the murmur of the pine trees, the music of the bells drifting across the harbor. That was all. He treated her like a child, amused her, teased her, smiled at her quaint fancies. It had been delightful. . . . The loveliest summer. . . . Was she to spoil it all by wanting something not intended for her?

She had failed him, had run away when perhaps she might have helped. Just to know Eric was a great deal. If she never saw him again she would not regret the summer. For the first time in her life she felt that she had really lived. Once upon a time, not so long ago she had been restless and unhappy, afraid that life would pass her by. She had longed for something to happen. Well, it had happened and still she was not satisfied. Silly child! Crying for the moon. . . . She determined not to let unhappiness spoil a beautiful memory. To-morrow she would sail over to the island and ask Eric to forgive her rudeness. He must not think her a silly, hysterical child. She would live in the present, let the uncertain future take care of itself. And sometime, when Eric wandered out of her life, she would remember this loveliest summer not as an aching agony but as a beautiful adventure. She determined to be brave, sensible, serene, excellent qualities but so difficult to attain.

When Eric wandered out of her life! Never to see him again, his grave dark eyes, the rusty plumes in his hair. Never to feel his arms folded tightly about her. Never to hear his voice, the beating of his heart.

. . . A wave of longing swept over her, washing away all thought of courage and serenity, breaking through the frail walls of good resolves she had so painfully erected. Of what value was the realization that she had helped him back to an interest in life compared to this aching desire for all of his love, for his head and his heart and his arms? She cried until she was exhausted and just as the pearl gray light of dawn crept through the window she wearily fell asleep.

* * * * * * * *

When she opened her eyes the next morning, Ruby was standing at the foot of the bed. The room was flooded with sunlight. There was a late look and a late smell in the air. Children's voices, the sharp click of croquet balls rose from the lawn below her window.

"What time is it?" Mary Ellen asked.

"After eleven," Ruby answered. "Mis' Bassett said you wasn't to be disturbed after comin' in so late. Did you have a nice time at the dance?"

"Yes," said Mary Ellen and suddenly remembered all the things that had happened. For a moment she lay motionless, gazing at the ceiling. The shadow again settled over her heart. She quickly brushed it away. This was another day. The sun was shining. She would sail to the island. . . .

"I brought you somethin' to eat." Ruby placed a tray on the table beside her bed.

"Thank you, Ruby." Mary Ellen sat up, threw back the covers.

"Gracious sakes!" Ruby exclaimed. "You went to bed with half your clothes on!"

"I was tired." Mary Ellen poured the china bowl full of water and bathed her face.

"You looked as pretty as a picture." Ruby settled down on the edge of the bed for a friendly chat. "They was all talkin' about it this mornin' at breakfast. And goodness knows he was as handsome as anybody in the movies."

Mary Ellen did not want to talk about Eric—not just then.

"Is Lita up?" she asked and bit a crescent from a slice of buttered toast.

"Not so as you'd notice! It's goin' to take her forever and the day after to learn how to be an artist the rate she's goin'. Miss Lukins said she danced last night same as an actress with that good-for-nothin' Joe Bandarra."

"They danced beautifully. I wish you might have seen them."

"I see all of that young lady I want to," Ruby observed. "Of all the vain, stuck-up —— Well, I know you're fond of her, Mary Ellen, so I won't say any more. But there's talk over town about her runnin' with Joe Bandarra. George said he was braggin' about it in the pool room. And Miss Lukins told the whole dinin'-room this mornin' that she hadn't a speck of back in her dress."

"Who?" asked Mary Ellen absently. "Miss Lillie Belle?"

"Her!" Ruby retorted with an eloquent gesture in the direction of Lita's room. "And no stockings to speak of—lace cobwebs. Miss Smithers is still goin' on about it."

"Yes, I suppose she is." Mary Ellen pushed aside the tray. She was impatient to sail to the island, to see Eric. She moved swiftly about the room, collected garments suitable for the occasion.

"Is that all you're goin' to eat?" asked Ruby indicating the neglected breakfast tray.

"I'm not hungry," she answered from the depths of the closet. "Besides I'm in a hurry."

"Where are you goin'—if it's any of my business?" Ruby lifted the tray and moved toward the door.

"Over to the island."

"I've heard of people livin' on love," Ruby fired as a parting shot, "but I never saw anybody foolish enough to try it before. I'm glad to say George never interfered with my appetite!" She went off downstairs disappointed because the friendly talk she had anticipated had somehow failed to materialize.

Mary Ellen, after a critical inspection of her wardrobe, donned the green dress Eric liked. She brushed her hair, braided it over her shoulders, gazed searchingly at her reflection in the mirror. She looked tired, a little pale. A dash of rouge helped, a dusting of powder on her nose. Eric must not know that she had cried herself to sleep. She determined to be for this last week gay and sparkling. Could she—with that queer dull ache in her heart? She resolved to try very hard. Lita's good luck beads lay on the dresser. She slipped them over her head, smiled at the curious whim. She felt that she needed the good luck beads. The weight of them about her neck was reassuring. She hurried downstairs, across the lawn to the boat landing. The *Cockle Shell* swayed gently in the morn-

ing wind. She loosened the rope, dropped into her tiny boat, turned its prow toward the island.

The wind blew briskly; the *Cockle Shell* lightly skimmed the waves. Mary Ellen felt that it was scarcely moving. She was impatient to reach the island, to explain to Eric. She knew what she meant to say. . . . "I was a foolish child. I'm sorry. Let's be happy the way we were." . . . She pictured the smile that would warm his gold-flecked eyes. Dear Eric! The ache in her heart melted away. It was difficult to be unhappy—this blue and golden morning when sun jewels sparkled on the bay and every puff of wind blew her nearer the island, nearer to Eric. Mary Ellen felt her spirits rising as the distance between the boat and the island diminished. Silly to spoil a beautiful adventure with tears and heartache. She skilfully managed sheet rope and tiller, hummed a wisp of song.

The *Cockle Shell* drifted beside the island landing. Mary Ellen sprang out, made it fast. Eric's boat lay at anchor in its accustomed place. She ran up the sloping path. Her feet were too impatient to walk. The Palace door was closed. She turned the knob, discovered that it was locked. She hurried around to the rear door. That too was securely fastened. Queer! Eric never bothered to lock doors. He must be there. His boat lay at anchor beside the landing. She called him. There was no answer save the echo of her own voice.

A little frightened, she pushed a box under the window, mounted it, peeped in as she had peeped that June afternoon when she had sailed to the island in

search of her crown. There was no one in the room. She crawled through the window, scarcely heeding the splinters that scratched her arms. No sign of Eric. She called again. There was no answering shout from the kitchen or the room at the top of the tower stairs. Where was Eric? Her heart beat frantically. He had been there since the dance. The highwayman's coat of claret velvet, the long curled wig, the plumed hat lay in an inglorious heap on the couch. The hearth was littered with half-smoked cigarettes. A used coffee cup stood on the table beside a plate heaped with the charred remains of burnt toast. But of Eric not a sign.

Mary Ellen hurried into the small bedroom in the rear, her feet winged with fright. Eric slept there sometimes when it was stormy. The cot bed had not recently been used. Its blankets were smooth and neat. She glanced about the neat, bare little room. His brushes were missing from the table that served as a dresser. His razor case had disappeared. She pushed aside the curtain that formed a closet of sorts. There was the shabby tweed suit blessedly familiar, Eric's khaki trousers, his woolly white sweater. She laid her cheek against the sweater for a moment, breathed a wordless little prayer. There were his boots, his flannel shirts, his swimming togs. But the newer brown tweed suit did not hang on its accustomed hook. She could not find his topcoat or his battered cowhide bag. Something had happened! Eric had gone!

Terrified, half sick with fright, she returned to the living-room. There were his brushes, his pencils, his drawing board. The half finished portrait of Grand-

father rested against an easel. The bitter-sweet and bayberry she had arranged the day before still glowed in a pottery jar. Nothing had changed. There was her sewing basket with its beaded tassel. The book Eric last had read lay open on the arm of the wing chair. There was the bronze kettle, the toasting fork, the twisted andirons. But Eric—Eric had gone!

XV

"WHAT you reckon is the matter with Mary Ellen, Mis' Bassett?" asked Ruby.

"I haven't noticed anything out of the way." Aunt Ella sifted a dusting of cinnamon over the sliced apples in the pie tin.

"She ain't any more than pecked at food for two days."

"Mary Ellen never eats very hearty," said Aunt Ella calmly. "That's no sign there's anything wrong."

"And she don't have a word to say," Ruby continued. "Just wanders off by herself or sits on the steps down there at the edge of the lawn lookin' out over the water."

"She never was one to talk much." Aunt Ella stooped over to test the temperature of the oven.

"But she didn't use to mope," worried Ruby. "You know how she's looked all summer, sort of lighted up from inside. Well now, seems as though somebody's turned off the switch. She don't shine any more."

"She's tired out, that's all." Aunt Ella slipped her flock of pies into the oven.

"She's lyin' on her bed this minute as limp as a rag doll," Ruby persisted. "An' cryin'."

"Mary Ellen is crying?"

"Fit to break her heart," sniffed Ruby with a suspicion of tears on her own straw-colored lashes.

"I'd better go up," said Aunt Ella, impressed at last with the gravity of the situation. "Keep an eye on

the pies." She hurried out of the kitchen leaving Ruby to drop a sympathetic tear into the dish pan as she washed up the mixing bowl and spoons.

Mary Ellen lay on her tumbled bed, gazing listlessly out through the window at the sun-dappled leaves stirring in the wind. Aunt Molly stroked her forehead, gently smoothed her hair back from her brow. The pungent fragrance of violet ammonia filled the room.

Aunt Ella paused in the doorway.

"What's the matter?" she asked, panting a little from her hurried climb up the narrow stairs.

Mary Ellen turned her head, looked at Aunt Ella through lashes jeweled with tears. The sight of her wan little face sent a chill through Aunt Ella's heart.

"What is it, baby?" she asked softly. "Are you sick?"

Mary Ellen shook her head.

"Tell me what it is, dearie." Aunt Ella reached for one of the small limp hands lying against the patchwork quilt.

"Nothing. I didn't sleep very well last night," said Mary Ellen in a small toneless voice. "Or the night before."

"And the night before that you didn't get home from the dance 'til three. You're tired out."

"But I can't sleep," murmured Mary Ellen.

"There is more ways of restin' than one," said Aunt Ella. "You need to get out in the sunshine. Why don't you and Eric go for a sail? You needn't come back for dinner. Ruby'll pack you a lunch."

Mary Ellen's lips trembled. A tear slipped through her lashes and rolled down over her cheek.

"Eric . . . has gone," she said in the same small toneless voice.

Aunt Ella's anxiety increased. So that was it—Eric! She spoke cheerfully, attempting an appearance of unconcern.

"You don't say. Well, that's news. When's he comin' back?"

"I don't know. Perhaps never."

Aunt Ella glanced at Aunt Molly. "You see," said Aunt Ella's eyes. "I was afraid somethin' like this would happen." And Aunt Molly's eyes answered, "Careful, Ella. Don't fret her."

"Did he make you unhappy? Are you fretting about Eric?"

"No. Please don't think that," protested Mary Ellen. "He didn't do anything. It—it's just me. I'm a silly little fool—and I'm tired, I guess."

"Of course you are," soothed Aunt Molly. "Why don't you go over and stay with Alice for a while?"

Mary Ellen shook her head.

"Yes, that would be nice," agreed Aunt Ella. "You need a change. I'll get Ruby's sister in to help."

Again Mary Ellen shook her head.

"You'd have a nice time," coaxed Aunt Molly. "The baby is a year old now. Just the cunning age. You know you like babies."

Mary Ellen's head moved less emphatically.

"I'll go 'phone Alice right away. You can go over on the bus this afternoon." Aunt Ella patted Mary Ellen's hand and bustled off downstairs bound on kindly errands.

Quiet in the little room up under the roof. No sound

save the leaves brushing against the screen, the soft murmur of Aunt Molly's voice.

"Aunt Molly. . . ."

"Yes, dearie."

"Was there ever a time in your life when it seemed as though the bottom had dropped out of the world?"

"Yes. . . . It seemed like that when we got word the *Lucy May* had gone down with all hands on board."

"What did you do?"

"First off, I thought I'd die," said Aunt Molly gently. "But I didn't. Somethin' would happen so I'd get through the day. The flowers needed weedin' or there'd be company for supper. Things like that. And after a while I didn't mind so much."

"How long—before you didn't mind so much?"

"I don't know. It's like gettin' over a bad spell of sickness. You don't realize you're gettin' better but first thing you know you're wantin' somethin' to eat. Then you wonder if the sun still makes little sparkles on the water, if the flowers are bloomin' in the borders. You want to walk over to the window and see. Then you're better and before long the sickness seems like a dream. You don't exactly forget but the ache and the fever go away." Her hand moved soothingly across Mary Ellen's brow.

"I wish I could go to sleep and not wake up until then," said Mary Ellen wistfully. "My heart hurts so."

"I know, dearie." Aunt Molly's eyes brimmed with tears. "But things mayn't be as bad as you think. I've a queer sort of notion that all the happiness I

missed has been saved up for you. That's a thought to hold on to. Will you cling to it tight?"

"I'll try." The white pinched look vanished from the wan little face. A faint tinge of pink crept into her cheeks. Dark lashes fluttered down over tired eyes. "Even if a candle goes out . . . You can sometimes . . . light it again. . . ." Her voice trailed off into silence. She nestled her cheek against Aunt Molly's hand; slipped wearily, gratefully into the sweet forgetting of sleep.

* * * * * * * *

"I wonder if you go on living after you feel dead inside," thought Mary Ellen as the bus bore her late that afternoon toward Rockville and Alice. "What's the use? . . . It isn't any fun. . . . Do you forget after a while? . . . Aunt Molly says you do. . . . Things happen. . . . Perhaps. . . . It isn't Eric's fault. . . . He wanted to love me. But he couldn't. . . . Not really. . . . He isn't happy either. . . . And that girl in the silver dress—is she happy? . . . Is anyone ever happy? . . . I love Eric. He loved her. She loved somebody else. . . . Like a merry-go-round. . . . Silly! . . . Will I ever see him again? . . . Perhaps. . . . When I'm an old lady. . . . Will it matter then? . . . Will I remember the flecks of gold in his eyes, the sound of his voice, the eyelash that wouldn't curl? . . . Of course. . . . I will always remember. . . . Everything. . . . All the lovely things he told me. . . . The ships he carved. . . . His sketches.

. . . Why didn't he come to see me before he went away? . . . Write to me? . . . Anything—so I would know. . . . How could he forget me all in one moment? . . . But it wasn't his fault. . . . It just happened that way. . . . All the long, long years. . . . What shall I do? . . . In books girls who are disappointed in love become sweet characters. They carry broth to sick people, visit the poor and needy. . . . I don't want to be a sweet character. . . . I want to sit with Eric on the rocks, lean against his shoulder, hear the music of the chimes drifting across the harbor. . . . I want—I want Eric! . . ."

And the old lady in the purple bonnet sitting across the aisle said to herself, "That sweet looking girl with the pretty hair is crying. Poor child! I wonder if she's lost something."

* * * * * * * *

Alice, gentle and placid, but very glad to see her, made Mary Ellen welcome in the green-shingled bungalow with its flower-boxes, its cretonne curtains, its wedding-gift pictures and bric-à-brac. The fat solemn baby cooed for her, opened his button of a mouth to exhibit an interesting new tooth. A frisky white dog with a ridiculous patch of black over one eye wagged his stumpy tail and offered a friendly paw. The canary in the living-room bay window peeped at her through the bars of his cage, decided she was a person who needed cheering up and burst into a trill of song. Alice's husband, big silent Mart Reilly, greeted her warmly when he came home for supper, nearly

crushed her hand in a well-meant but rather painful effort to express his pleasure at having her for a visit. There was nothing in Alice's house to remind her of Eric; no need for pretense, no fear of painful questions. Mary Ellen, unpacking her bag in the dainty blue and white guest room, felt as though she had reached a quiet haven after a weary struggle through darkness and battering waves.

Supper was a festive meal. Alice set the table with her best rose-sprigged dishes, never used except to celebrate an important occasion. There were flowers from the tiny garden, pink and lavender cosmos, in a crystal bowl. The chicken was delicious. So were the biscuits and raspberry tarts. Mary Ellen was surprised to find herself eating, actually enjoying food. The tension, which for two days had held her in a vice-like, destroying grip, gradually relaxed. She talked with Alice about people both of them knew, admired the rose-sprigged china, smiled at the baby propped in his high chair solemnly sucking a denuded bone. Mart Reilly talked very little save when he urged her to a second helping or commented upon the weather. His silence was soothing; his few remarks were pleasantly impersonal. The peace of the green-shingled bungalow slipped into her heart, lessened the dull pain. She felt listless but calm and rested. She ate three raspberry tarts.

After supper she wiped the dishes for Alice in the small shining kitchen, and later watched Alice put the baby to bed. Alice was delighted to display her son's charms; his straight back, his fat legs, the soft little kissing place at the back of his neck. Mary Ellen

agreed that he was the world's prize infant, played "This little pig went to market" with his pink toes.

"How solemn he is," she said. "I don't think he likes foolishness. Do you suppose he'll be a preacher when he grows up?"

"He's going to be president," said Alice serenely and slipped a pink flannel gown over the baby's fuzzy golden head.

"Then let me hold him," coaxed Mary Ellen. "So I can tell newspaper reporters about it when I'm a nice old lady."

Alice placed the future president in her arms and moved across the room to fold back the crib blankets. Mary Ellen held the fragrant pink flannel bundle against her breast, kissed the soft fuzz on the top of his head. The baby stared up at her with round, china-blue eyes, yawned prodigiously. That amused her. She talked to him quite happily until Alice declared that it was long past his bedtime, tucked him into the crib with a warm bottle and a woolly duck for company.

"He'll sleep all night," she said, beaming with pride in her offspring.

"Bless his heart!" Mary Ellen touched the baby's soft cheek. She felt curiously calm. It was as though an anesthetic had mercifully deadened her pain. Queer. Like moving through a dream. She was grateful for a reprieve from active suffering, for an interval free from thought. She slipped her arm around Alice's waist as they wandered into the living-room. Alice squeezed her hand.

"It's nice to see you again," Alice said.

"I'm glad to be here."

"I've asked you so often. How did you happen to make up your mind to come?"

"Aunt Ella made it up for me. I was tired."

Alice noticed the shadows under her eyes, the droop at the corners of her mouth but wisely made no comment.

"How long can you stay?"

"I don't know."

"We'll keep you now that we have our hands on you. I've planned lots of things."

"That's nice." Mary Ellen determined to be as cheerful as possible. Pleasant to have friends . . . people to care about you when life turned upside down. . . . Aunt Molly was right. Things helped. . . . Friends . . . babies . . . frisky white dogs. . . . But Eric. . . . Where was Eric with his grave dark eyes, the rusty plumes in his hair? . . .

It was not so hard to be cheerful in the cozy living-room with its rose-shaded lamps, its gay wicker furniture, its wedding-gift clock ticking away on the ledge above the fireplace. Mart fussed with the radio, located a jazz orchestra; and, his contribution to the evening's festivities having been offered, settled into an armchair to nod behind a newspaper. Alice and Mary Ellen curled up among the cushions on the davenport. They talked about things that had happened years ago when they were little girls, amusing things that made them smile. Presently Alice found an old snap-shot album. They looked through it, laughing at the absurdities of their younger shadow selves.

"Heavens! What a funny looking dress!"

"Did I ever wear pigtails like that?"

"Oh, there's Jim Mason in his first long trousers. He looks as though he had just fallen heir to a fortune."

"Remember this one? The day of the Sunday School excursion. Oh, Alice, that hat! And there's Miss Archer. Remember how she used to flutter her lashes at the minister?"

"Wasn't I fat! And look at the plaid skirt! That's you playing princess on the island."

"Here's Lolly and the boy who visited at Barbara's that summer. What was his name?"

"Clarence something or other. He gave her a ring with a glass stone and they pretended to be engaged. Wasn't she pretty? No wonder all the boys were in love with her."

"Here's the snow man we made on Barbara's lawn."

"Judge Sanborn's high silk hat! Remember how he scolded!"

"And here's Barbara with her sled. Did you ever see anything funnier than her legs? They look like pipe stems."

"Who on earth is this?"

"Fred Nutting in a Hallowe'en costume. And there's Jim with that fish he caught off the end of the dock."

"He talked about it for weeks. It grew and grew until you'd have thought it was the whale that swallowed Jonah. Jim always did like to talk."

"Ever see him?"

"Sometimes."

"We'll have him for supper while you're here. Mart likes him a lot."

"All right. I don't care. . . . Here's Barbara in a hat as big as an umbrella. She looks like a cricket under a toadstool."

"Her aunt brought it from Paris. Do you remember how she cried when it blew overboard one day and melted or something?"

"Look, Alice! You and Mart."

"That hat with the feather. I thought it was too beautiful to wear."

"You both look so serious. Was he proposing?"

"We were probably trying to think of something to say. I was bashful and so was he. But I liked him even then. He never teased me or put dead fish heads in my desk at school."

"Here's our eighth grade teacher. I loved her."

"So did I."

"She always made me think of Easter lilies. I saved up my spending money for weeks and bought her a cut glass perfume bottle. Doesn't it seem a long time ago?"

"Ages. Do you wish you were in the eighth grade again, Mary Ellen?"

"Sometimes . . . to-night. Do you?"

"No. I hated school and I love being Mrs. Martin Reilly even if my husband does go to sleep when I have company."

She roused Mart, despatched him to the corner drug store for ice-cream. They ate it in the kitchen and talked and laughed a great deal. No, it was not so hard to be cheerful. Mary Ellen blessed Aunt Ella

for sending her to Rockville, kissed Alice an affectionate and grateful good-night.

But it was more difficult to be cheerful when she lay alone in the spare-room bed and thought, mercifully suspended for a brief interval, returned. Then nothing seemed to matter, nothing helped. Life without Eric. . . . Loneliness. . . . The long, long years. . . . Never to see him again. . . . A wave of longing engulfed her. She felt herself sinking down . . . down . . . down into unfathomed depths of woe. Never to sit with him in the doorway of Tarpaper Palace, walk to the lighthouse, lie beside him on the sand at Half Moon Beach. . . . Never again to wake up in the morning glad because it was another day, loving the sun, the wind. . . . Eric. . . . She buried her face in the pillow and cried herself to sleep. . . .

XVI

THE days which followed were, in a measure, tranquil; the nights, less difficult. Mary Ellen wheeled the future president along the narrow elm-shaded streets of Rockville. The frisky small dog trotted beside the perambulator when he was not investigating strange properties or treeing cats. She helped Alice to keep the green-shingled bungalow in shining order, embroidered bunnies and ducks on wee pink rompers, read for hours at a time curled up in the porch hammock. And if life no longer moved to a happy rhythm, if the days had ceased to be a breathless adventure, they were peaceful at least. She grew to dread the time when she must return to Gray Gables, when she would be obliged to stand on the veranda and see the tower of Tarpaper Palace rising above the tangle of pine and scrub oak trees. Alice's house, Alice herself, was a refuge. She absorbed the tranquillity of Alice's quiet life, busied herself with trifling tasks. And each day it was less difficult to be cheerful; each night she slept more soundly.

The second morning of her exile she had called up Gray Gables to find if there had been a letter, a message of any kind. Ruby answered the telephone. Yes, they were getting along fine. Eva took to the work real good. Mary Ellen was not to fret but to have a nice time. No, there wasn't any mail but wait a minute and she'd look. (Oh, that long interval of waiting while hope and fear struggled in Mary Ellen's

heart!) No mail except a post-card from that Mrs. Foster who lived in Pittsburgh. Picture of a bridge or something. (As though she cared about pictures from Pittsburgh!) The Queen of Sheba hadn't gone near art school. She was in bed that very minute and the room looking as though it had been stirred with a pudding stick. Everybody was well. Mary Ellen was not to worry. Then Ruby lowered her voice and whispered, as well as one can whisper over a telephone, "I'll let you know the very first minute there's any news of him." And with that Mary Ellen was obliged to be content.

Her recovery, as Aunt Molly had predicted, was so gradual that she was not actively aware of its progress. There were times, when she was playing with the baby or reading a fascinating story, that she forgot her heart was broken. Mary Ellen was naturally sunny, incurably romantic. She still believed that people in real life might "live happily ever after," that almost at any moment something beautiful was bound to happen. The rose-colored spectacles, a little dulled but still serviceable, resumed their invisible position upon her straight little nose. Hope lifted broken wings, lived again in her heart. The "if Eric comes back" which ran like a hidden current beneath her thoughts changed to "when Eric comes back." She became each day a little more sure that he would eventually return.

Sleep and new associations worked their healing charm. The pain in her heart was less insistent. She suffered only at intervals when something recalled Eric and Tarpaper Palace; the cluster of bitter-sweet

Alice placed in a jar on the living room mantel, a tiny carved ship in a shop window, a street organ playing her favorite waltz. Then a wave of longing would sweep over her, so strong, so overwhelming that she was obliged to close her eyes, cling to the nearest support. For a moment it would seem as though she could not keep on living. What was the use? She wanted only to crawl off into a corner and give up the fight. But there was Alice who must not be troubled, " Sonny " who liked to be rocked, the frisky small dog fairly clamoring for a ball to chase. She came through those ordeals of memory and longing not bravely nor with flying colors but slowly, ingloriously, her tatter of courage dipping almost to the ground. Each time it was easier. And always there was the whisper of hope in her heart. Eric *had* cared about her. He must come back.

Jim Mason came one evening for supper. He brought an enormous box of candy for Mary Ellen, a stuffed rabbit for the baby, pink carnations from the florist shop for Alice. Again the rose-sprigged china graced the table. Again there were raspberry tarts. Jim ate prodigiously, talked a great deal, beamed at Mary Ellen like a benevolent owl. His great booming laugh shattered the peace of the little house. Though he was not as big as Mart he seemed too large for the small room. He broke one of the precious rose-sprigged cups, upset his goblet of water. A bull in a china shop—that was Jim. Mary Ellen sighed. Poor Jim! And he meant so well. He informed them that coffee had gone up and soothed their alarm by adding that sugar had come down. He told a joke acquired

from a traveling salesman and rather spoiled the effect by putting the climax in the wrong place. He exuded an atmosphere of big business, cigars and barber shop lotions. The same Jim; a well meaning, benevolent bore.

Alice brought out the snap-shot album after dinner, insisted that Mary Ellen show him the pictures while Mart helped her with the dishes. But somehow it was not amusing to look at them with Jim. He soon lost interest, talked about the new store which was even then in the process of being erected in Rockville. Mary Ellen feared for a moment that he might want her to walk down to the main street and look at the cellar. But Mart's armchair was comfortable. She was spared that ordeal.

When the dishes were finished and the future president had been tucked in his crib, Alice and Mart went over to call on the neighbors. Jim led Mary Ellen out on the porch, settled her in the hammock, and sat beside her in the intimate darkness.

"Warm enough?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you." Mary Ellen withdrew to the corner of the hammock, moved it gently with the tip of her slipper against the floor.

"Getting cool these days." Jim selected a cigarette from a massive silver case.

"Nice little place Mart has," he said after an interval of silence.

"Yes, isn't it?"

"I envy him. Nothing like having a place of your own."

"Why don't you get married?" Mary Ellen asked

absently and regretted it a moment later when Jim unexpectedly said:

"I'm ready whenever you are."

"Whenever I am!" she echoed a bit faintly.

"Sure. You're the girl I'm going to marry. Mrs. James Albert Mason. How will you like that on your calling card?"

"Are—are you proposing to me, Jim?" she asked as airily as possible, trying to make it seem a pleasant sort of a joke.

"Don't you know? Ought I to get down on my knees? You'll have to put me wise if I make any mistakes. I never did it before." He laughed loudly to cover his embarrassment, moved in her direction. "I've been thinking it over for some time. Can I sell you the proposition?"

"Oh, no—Jim. Please don't ask me." There was a note of distress in her voice. She couldn't quite be sure whether it was a joke or not but she hoped very hard that it was.

"I'm not much good at a job like this, but I have been thinking about it, Mary Ellen. You and I in a little house like this."

"Oh, no, Jim!" Mary Ellen realized that it was not a joke. It was a genuine proposal.

"Why not?" he asked quietly.

"Well, I'm fond of you, Jim."

"But you don't love me?"

"I'm afraid not," she murmured and twisted the belt of her sweater. This was rather dreadful. She had heard of girls who enjoyed refusing proposals. How could they?

"That's all right." Jim's laugh was strangely subdued. "If you're fond of me, that will do. I've loved you ever since you were a kid, Mary Ellen. I'd be good to you—as good as I know how."

Jim's humility touched her. She had never seen him in a tender moment. He was nicer that way. But with Jim the tender moments would be few.

"I know that, Jim. I know you'd be good to me."

"And maybe you'd come to love me. How do you know what love is anyway? You're only a kid."

Mary Ellen did know—but she could not tell Jim. She answered instead:

"Every girl has her own idea of love and the sort of man she wants to marry."

"And I'm not it?"

"Not exactly. I—I'm sorry, Jim."

"We could get Mart to build us a house over here in Rockville. Like this. Or bigger if you want. Business is pretty good. I could get you just about everything you'd want, an electric refrigerator and all that. And I would be good to you."

He would, in his own clumsy inadequate way. Mary Ellen knew that. He was steady, reliable, kind. You could depend on Jim. She would have a home of her own—children perhaps. He would always love her, be proud of her. What if she didn't love him? Life would be empty indeed if there was to be no one to care for her. . . . Eric had gone. . . . Why not? . . .

"Haven't you anything to say, Mary Ellen?"

"I'm thinking," she answered.

Why not? . . . why not? Lots of girls mar-

ried men they did not love. . . . Why not? . . . As if in answer to the question a strain of music drifted through the shadows. Someone on the doctor's veranda across the street was singing "My Old Kentucky Home." The words, the melody recalled the evening on the rocks when Eric had told her about the boy who died. She saw again the thin bright crescent moon, heard the lapping of the waves against the rocks, the sad-sweet music of the bells, Eric's voice. . . . "Darling! . . . Pretty girl. . . . Lovely child. . . . I care so much about you, Mary Ellen." . . .

"No, Jim. I couldn't. Please don't ask me."

"You love somebody else?"

"Yes, Jim," she answered softly.

"All right. I reckon that lets me out, right now. But I'll hang on just the same. I usually get what I want."

And while the clear young voice on the doctor's veranda sang "Weep no more, my lady, Oh, weep no more to-day," Mary Ellen wondered if that were true, if Jim was indeed her destiny. . . . Mrs. James Albert Mason. . . . Perhaps. But not yet. . . . Not just yet. . . . Eric might come back. And if he didn't, how could she marry Jim? Better to be lonely and free than lonely and tied. . . . "We will sing one song for our old Kentucky home" . . . Why couldn't Eric have loved her? . . . Pain throbbed in her heart. Tears, never far away, misted her lashes. . . . "For our old Kentucky home far away." . . . The clear young voice was silent. She seemed to lose Eric all over again with the dying

away of the song. . . . Never to see him again. . . . The old torturing round of thought. . . .

"Let's go in the house, Jim," she said. "It's—it's getting cold out here."

XVII

MARY ELLEN sat alone on the porch of the green-shingled bungalow. It was the evening of her fifth day in exile. Twilight shadows drifted across the lawn, filmed the borders of phlox and geraniums. An early star shone faintly high above the peaked roof of the doctor's house across the street. Quiet enfolded her, a deep brooding silence, broken only by the creaking of the hammock chains, infrequent footsteps, voices of children playing "Hide and Seek" in a near-by yard. She moved the hammock gently to and fro, scarcely conscious of the effort, lost in a maze of half formed thoughts. . . .

The last day of August. A week ago to-night she had danced with Eric beneath the colored lanterns at the Fakirs' Frolic. She wondered that she was able to think of it so calmly, as though it was something that had happened in the dimly remembered past, almost as though it had never happened at all, save in some lovely half dream between sleep and waking. Was Tarpaper Palace a real place or was it only a creation of her fancy, a frail, unsubstantial castle in the air? And Eric—was he real? Or had she imagined him in her loneliness, her longing for companionship? Nothing seemed quite real to-night. Twilight was difficult. Then the whisper of hope grew very faint, all but died away. Perhaps none of it had been real. Better that way. The story of the summer was finished. She must close the book and lay it away on the shelf.

Perhaps she might venture to open it again some wintry night when the wind howled down the chimney, when snow drifted against the windows, when blue skies and golden sunlight seemed very far away.

The loveliest summer. . . . There would never be another so beautiful. Other summers, perhaps. Many of them; but never an enchanted summer. It was sad—like looking forward to the first Christmas after you knew beyond hope or question that there was no Santa Claus. The years would pass, dull stupid years, devoid of glamor or surprise. She would teach school, spelling, tiresome fractions, the story of George Washington and his hatchet. Over and over again, the same monotonous round.

Perhaps in desperation she would marry Jim and settle down to a prosaic sort of life in a green-shingled bungalow. She would grow stout, a little dull, give stupid parties, talk about rompers and measles, the things Jim liked to eat. Perhaps. . . . Life seemed to play tricks like that. Sometime she would open the treasure chest hidden in her heart to find it full of meaningless trifles. She would wonder that once they had seemed precious, destroy them in a fit of housewifely zeal, fill the chest with new treasures. Perhaps. . . . But while her mind accepted the possibility, her heart, treacherous romantic foolish heart, refused to believe it or to give up hope. Incurably romantic. Mary Ellen, even at twilight when hope was the merest whisper and the rose-colored spectacles were blurred with shadows, still expected something beautiful to happen in just a minute or two.

Something did happen. But it was not beautiful.

It was rather distressing, quite too preposterous for belief. Footsteps sounded on the neat graveled path, stumbled up the steps of the porch. A figure, slim and vaguely familiar, emerged from the shadows. A voice, tense with emotion, called her name.

"Lolly!" she exclaimed and rose from the hammock to greet this unexpected guest.

"Is that you, Mary Ellen?"

"Yes. Yes, Lolly. What is it?" She reached for Lolly's hand and discovered that it was icy cold.

"Are you alone? Where's Alice and Mart?"

"Alice is rocking the baby. He's cutting a new tooth. Mart is out somewhere. Do you want to see them?"

"No. I want to see you." Lolly fumbled in her beaded bag for a moist handkerchief.

"Let's sit in the hammock. . . . There, that's better. Now tell me what's happened, Lolly. You're trembling and your hands are cold as ice."

"I had to see you, Mary Ellen. It—it's Joe." Lolly's chin quivered, tears rolled unchecked down over her cheeks.

"What's happened to Joe?"

"He's running away. . . . To-night."

"Running away!" exclaimed Mary Ellen and secretly thought it would be a good thing for all concerned if he did.

"With that girl." Lolly's fingers toyed with the clasp of the beaded bag.

"What girl, Lolly?"

"At your place."

Fear clutched Mary Ellen's heart.

"Lita?"

"They're running away to-night."

"Oh, Lolly! They couldn't. It's too ——"

"They are! I know!"

"How do you know? Tell me, Lolly."

"I've heard them talking. I followed them lots of times." The words came in a rushing torrent. "They sit out on the rocks near the Portuguese dock. I've followed them and hidden in the bushes and watched. He's crazy about her. I—I saw him kiss her. And I heard them talk about going to dance on the stage. She said she knew somebody in New York who'd fix it up. And I can't bear it! I can't, Mary Ellen. I've tried. You don't know how hard I've tried!"

"Oh, Lolly, you're mistaken. Lita wouldn't —— Why, her family is —— She wouldn't!"

"Wouldn't she?" Lolly turned upon her almost fiercely. Her face was a strained white blur in the darkness; her eyes burned feverishly. "She's crazy about him. I heard her. I watched. She meets him somewhere every night. They're going. To-night. Unless somebody stops them. I'll kill myself. Honest, I will!"

"Hush, Lolly —— Please, dear!"

"But you don't know, Mary Ellen. I—I love Joe. I can't live if he throws me over."

"Don't, dear ——" Mary Ellen slipped her arm around the slim trembling figure. "You'll be ill if you cry like that. Tell me about it."

"I've known for a long time something was the matter," sobbed Lolly. "Joe acted queer. Then one night I saw him with her and I followed them. The

boys told me he boasted about her, said he could marry her if he wanted. Everybody knows. Oh, Mary Ellen, I've almost died! I don't suppose you can understand ——"

"Yes, I can, Lolly. Your part of it."

"I know how Joe is. He's had lots of girls. They're crazy about him. But he wanted me to marry him. He gave me the ring and all. It's that girl. Her folks have money. I know she's real class. You can tell. But Joe wouldn't be happy with her. She wouldn't want him for long. She'd just tie him up. You know Joe's a Catholic, Mary Ellen. If he married her, he couldn't get a divorce. I've thought it all out and I tried to tell Joe. I waited for him last night and he laughed at me. Then Joe's brother met me at noon to-day and said they were going to run away!" Lolly paused, sobbed brokenly, her head on Mary Ellen's shoulder.

Lita running away with Joe! She couldn't do such a stupid, cruel thing! Someone must stop them—if it were true. How distressed Aunt Ella would be! And Jerry. . . . What a dreadful world! Mary Ellen's head spun round and round like a Fourth of July pinwheel. "Joe's brother told you?" she asked trying very hard to be calm.

"Joe was tight." Lolly's strained, choking voice continued the story. "He boasted to Manny that he and the girl were going to run away. Manny wouldn't believe it and that made Joe mad. He was tight enough to show him a note she'd written and threatened to beat him up if he told. But Manny told me. They're going to drive to Easter Haven and take the

night train from there. It leaves around three o'clock. I looked it up to make sure."

"Joe was joking," said Mary Ellen as much to reassure herself as to comfort Lolly. "Or Lita was joking. They may have thought of it just for fun. Lita says a great many things that she does not mean." Lita with her poses. Spoiled, headstrong Lita. Wanting to kick her slipper over the moon.

"Do you think so? Do you really think so, Mary Ellen?" Lolly's eyes plead with her for the assurance she scarcely dared to give.

"Of course I think so. Girls don't do things like that. Except in books."

"I've been so scared. And there was no one to tell. I thought maybe you could do something. I can't. Joe won't listen to me. And he'd kill Manny if he tried to interfere. You've got to do something. I'll kill myself. Honest, I will!"

"Don't, Lolly! Don't talk that way, dear. Yes, of course, I must do something."

"I know Joe'd come back to me if it wasn't for her. It's gone to his head. The money and dancing on the stage. Oh, I wish he couldn't dance ever again!"

"Would you want him now, Lolly—after this?"

"I don't care what he's done. He could beat me and it wouldn't make any difference. He's so sweet, sometimes, Mary Ellen. I keep thinking of that. Oh, you don't know what it is to love anybody the way I love Joe!"

Mary Ellen did know. Her own unhappiness made her sensitive to the misery that throbbed in Lolly's voice, the dull despair in her eyes. Joe Bandarra

wasn't worth it. But that could not be helped. Lolly loved him. Lovely Lolly. . . . Little frail winged butterfly caught in a cruel net. And Lita must not be allowed to kick her slipper over the moon. If it were true. . . . But it couldn't be. . . . Girls didn't do things like that. . . .

"I'll go home right away," she said and felt like old man Atlas bearing on her shoulders the weight of the world. "Come in while I pack my bag."

But Lolly did not want to see Alice.

"I'll wait for you down at the bus station. You're a peach, Mary Ellen. I'll bless you as long as I live. I'll never, never forget it. Honest, Mary Ellen."

"That's all right." Mary Ellen patted Lolly's arm reassuringly. "Just try not to worry too much."

She watched Lolly's hurrying figure until it was lost in the shadows. Then she went in the house to pack her bag, invent excuses for Alice, bid farewell to the baby, the frisky white dog, the peace of the green-shingled bungalow.

Half an hour later she sat beside Lolly in the bus, her mind busy with distracting thoughts. And in the mingled emotions of sympathy for Lolly, anxiety for Lita she forgot for a little her own unhappiness, no longer dreaded the return to Gray Gables.

* * * * * * * *

It was nearly ten o'clock when she walked around the corner of the house and across the lawn to the veranda that faced the bay. Grandfather and Aunt Ella sat there alone.

"Gracious! Is that you, Mary Ellen?"

"I was homesick." Mary Ellen dropped her bag on the step, kissed Aunt Ella, sat on the arm of Grandfather's chair.

"Well, blest if I ain't glad to see you." Grandfather patted her hand. "I been missin' you more'n you'd think. This old hulk is as dead as the doldrums without you."

"It's nice to be back. Where's Lita?"

"She went out ridin' with Jerry," Aunt Ella answered.

"With Jerry? Are you sure it was Jerry? Did you see him?"

"Why, yes. They left around eight o'clock. What's the matter with that?"

"Nothing. I just wondered. She hasn't been so friendly with Jerry lately."

"They've been as thick as thieves all week," said Aunt Ella. "He's a nice boy."

"Jerry's sweet," said Mary Ellen and wondered if Lita was using him as a screen to conceal her affair with Joe. She was quite capable of it. Mary Ellen felt that she would enjoy shaking her thoroughly.

Aunt Ella asked questions about Alice and the baby. Mary Ellen answered them absently, lost in thought. Should she tell them about it? What was the use? Perhaps Lolly was mistaken. She was jealous, hurt, half hysterical. Perhaps Lita had no such thought in her small round head. Better to wait until Jerry brought her home. She told Aunt Ella about her visit; assured her that she felt rested and was glad to be at home. As she talked fragments of thought, bits of memory whirled round and round in her head. . . .

Lolly's eyes. . . . Lita and Joe in the shadow of the kitchen porch. . . . Should she tell Lita that she knew? . . . Hard to deal with Lita, cool, poised, lazily smiling. . . . Home again. . . . The veranda vines, the steps at the edge of the lawn. . . . Tarpaper Palace, a vague shadow, a smudged blur in the distance. . . . Her head felt like a kaleidoscope. Each time she shook it the fragments formed a picture. . . . So many pictures! . . . Lolly hiding in the bushes, watching Joe and Lita. . . . The portrait of the girl in the silver gown. . . . Lita asleep, her cheek against her hand. . . . Jerry standing pale and miserable against the banks of evergreen at the Fakirs' Frolic. . . . What a hopeless tangle! And it all seemed to depend on her. Mary Ellen sighed. Was she the girl who used to fret because nothing ever happened to her? She felt like Atlas, Becky Sharp, the Lily Maid of Astolat all rolled into one.

The clock in the steeple of the Baptist church struck ten and Lita had not returned. Grandfather shuffled off to bed. Aunt Ella went out into the kitchen to set the dough for the breakfast rolls. Mary Ellen said she was sleepy. She climbed the familiar stairs to her room up under the roof and lighted the candles. A folded sheet of paper lay beside her powder box, a rather crumpled sheet of paper inscribed with her name. Perhaps Lita already had gone. In stories girls who eloped always left a note. She unfolded the paper with anxious fingers, held it close to the candle and discovered that the note was not Lita's farewell. It was a laboriously penciled message from Ruby:

DEAR MARY ELLEN:

I can't stay any longer since George is waiting for me and not in a good humor due to a boil on his neck which makes him sort of impatient. I called up where you stayed in Rockville and they said you were on your way home. It is now nine o'clock and you have not come. So I will write these few lines to tell you that I saw him to-night. I was down at the end of the lawn looking for a pocket-book which Mrs. Smithers thought she lost this morning and has accused everybody in the house of stealing and I saw the ferry stop at the island and somebody get out. It was near dark so I could not see good but I think it was him. I write these few lines so you will sleep good and not worry about anything.

From your Friend

RUBY.

P. S. The party that got off the ferry was a man and very tall. Also thin.

P. S. No. 2. The pocket-book was in Mrs. S.'s knitting-bag all the time. Old buzzard!

Mary Ellen read the note through twice, her cheeks flushing, her eyes bright with excitement. Things began to whirl about. The candles, the powder box, the bowl of wine-red asters danced in a dizzy circle. She sat down on the edge of the bed undecided whether to laugh or cry. She compromised by doing both. Then she read the message again. She read it many times. She learned it word for word.

"The party that got off at the island was a man and very tall. Also thin." No need to mention a name.

Ruby understood. Eric had not forgotten her. He had returned to the island. But why hadn't he come over this evening? Perhaps he had. . . . No, Aunt Ella would have told her. Perhaps he had returned to pack up his things and did not intend to see her. Oh, the utter desolation of that thought! She banished it promptly. There was no room in her happy heart for dismal thoughts. It was enough just to know that Eric had come back, that to-morrow she might see him.

She sank back against the pillow, gazed at the candlelight shadows trooping across the ceiling. One thing was certain. Eric must not know how unhappy she had been. When he came she would greet him coolly, casually. She would wear her prettiest frock, pin her hair in grown-up coils over her ears. He must not think her too eager. After all she had some decent pride. She would ask him if he had a pleasant journey and talk about the weather. The picture of herself cool and elegant talking to a distressed and imploring Eric pleased her. It seemed, in a measure, to compensate for the unhappiness she had suffered. She enlarged upon it. She fancied Eric begging her to forgive him. For what? She did not exactly know but the fancy was agreeable. Eric must not think that she was to be lightly won. After an interval of decent pride she would surrender gracefully with a bit of Lita's grand lady manner, a proper show of reluctance.

Would she? Could she? Mary Ellen smiled at her own folly. She knew that her eyes would betray her, her voice, the flush in her cheeks. Eric would know as surely as though she ran straight into his arms, sobbed

out her relief and joy on his shoulder. Why not? Of what importance was decent pride? Of what importance was anything compared to the bliss of seeing Eric again? She cuddled Ruby's message beneath her cheek. Never in all the world had there ever been a literary composition more elegantly worded, more altogether satisfactory. She felt strangely light, uplifted, as though she would float to the ceiling unless she held on tightly to something. Eric was there . . . on the island . . . less than a quarter of a mile away. She forgot Lita, Lolly, the tangle of their affairs. . . . To-morrow she would see Eric, hear his voice, touch him and know that he was real. The clock on the dresser ticked away the minutes unnoticed. Time had ceased to have a meaning. Mary Ellen floated through space, upborne by invisible wings, viewed the universe through rose-colored spectacles undimmed by any shadow of doubt. And in her heart the little birds that had so long been silent, plucked their heads from beneath their feathers, sang trill after trill of ecstatic song.

A sound on the landing attracted her attention. She glanced toward the door. Lita stood there coolly smiling, Lita who was going to run away.

"Hello! When did you get back?" Lita asked.

"To-night. Come in. Let's talk."

"I'm dead tired." Lita daintily smothered a yawn.

Mary Ellen gazed at her intently. How slim and cool and unapproachable she looked standing there on the landing in the cream-colored coat with its fluffy fur collar, the trim scarlet hat shading her eyes. Lolly was mistaken. Lita would never dream of actually

eloping with Joe Bandarra. Mary Ellen wondered that she had been so alarmed. Foolish!

"What have you been doing this week?" she asked.

"Painting onions." Lita's fastidious nose wrinkled at the memory. "It was fascinating. You will never know true happiness, Mary Ellen, until you have painted an onion."

"What else?"

"Oh, riding around with Jerry. He's a lamb sometimes."

"Jerry's sweet!" said Mary Ellen warmly.

Lita raised her one visible brow, shrugged an indifferent shoulder, stifled another yawn. "A little beauty sleep ought to be useful," she drawled. "Good-night, funny child. I'll see you in the morning." She hesitated for a moment, her eyes softened. A queer little smile curved her lips. "I'm glad you're back, Mary Ellen. You're a very precious lamb!" She blew a kiss from the tips of her fingers, crossed the narrow landing to her own room and closed the door with a careless slam.

Mary Ellen lay quietly on the bed, listening for sounds from the other room at the top of the third floor stairs. They were few but reassuring; the opening of a drawer, footsteps, slippers dropped on the floor. Presently the pencil line of light under the door vanished. Lita had evidently gone to bed. Mary Ellen decided that Lolly could not have been right. But she determined to take no chances, to keep a vigilant watch upon Lita's door. She must pretend to go to bed. Lita must not know that she was watching. She moved noisily around the room, brushed her hair,

braided it for the night, slipped a kimono on over her dress. She closed the door with a purposeful bang. Then she opened it a little, secured it at that angle with a pile of books. She wished she dared to let the candle burn. It would be hard to keep awake in the dark. But Lita might suspect. Somehow she did not want her to know. Surely Lolly was mistaken. She blew out the candles, said her prayers and crept into bed.

Ruby's message lay on her pillow. Pleasant to feel it there, rough and crinkly beneath her cheek. . . . Eric had come back. . . . To-morrow she would see him. . . . And of course Lita would not do anything so preposterous as to elope with Joe Bandarra. It was too absurd for belief. Even an experienced woman of the world would be expected to show some signs of nervousness on the eve of an elopement. Lita had shown no such signs. She had smiled, yawned, wafted a kiss from the tips of her fingers. Lolly had been hysterical. She had imagined a great deal more than the truth. . . . Poor Lolly! People were selfish creatures. . . . She was selfish. She found it very hard to be unhappy about Lolly with Ruby's message beneath her cheek. She fell into a sort of half doze, lay for a long time between sleep and waking, lost in pleasant thoughts.

The wind blew through the room. It fluttered the pages of a magazine, twisted the thin curtains into writhing, fantastic shapes. Sleepy fancies flocked through her mind. How heavy her eyelids felt! She must keep awake. She thought of the wretched nights that she could not sleep. Now that it was necessary to keep awake she was sleepy . . . so sleepy.

. . . She wondered if Lita was sleeping with her cheek pillowed on her hand; if Lolly slept in the shabby cottage near the factory; if Eric lay in the room at the top of the tower stairs, listening to the wind, the murmur of the pine trees, the waves washing against the rocks. Life was confusing. People's affairs became so tangled, so curiously intertwined; Lita, Lolly, Jerry, Joe, Ruby, Eric. . . . The list was endless. . . . Queer. . . . The lids of her eyes drooped drowsily. She raised them with an effort, listened for ominous sounds. There were none. Only the wind, the flutter of the curtain, leaves brushing against the screen. Again her eyelids drooped. This time it was more difficult to lift them. . . . She must keep awake. . . . Weights on her eyes, delicious drowsiness stealing through her body. . . . A clock struck midnight, twelve muffled strokes. The weary sentinel fell asleep, a smile on her lips, Ruby's message cuddled beneath her cheek.

* * * * * * * *

"Mary Ellen!"

She drowsily opened her eyes, wondering if she had dreamed that somebody called her name.

"Mary Ellen!"

"Yes—What is it?"

"I'm sorry to wake you, dear. Where are the matches?"

"On the island," she mumbled, still half asleep.

"Where?" asked the strange insistent voice.

"On the dresser—over there." Who was it that kept on talking when she wanted to sleep?

She knew in a moment. A match spluttered, a wavering thread of candle-light streamed through the darkness. Madame Cavella stood beside the bed wrapped in her brocade dressing gown, a row of tin curlers encircling her brow.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Mary Ellen."

"What—what's the matter?"

"Where is Lita going with a bag at this hour of the night?"

Lita! Mary Ellen sat up, instantly wide awake.

"Lita! Has she gone?"

"I couldn't sleep. Peggy's fudge cake, I guess. I was sitting beside the window. She crossed the lawn with her bag. Where was she going? Do you know anything about it?"

"She—she's running away with Joe Bandarra!" Mary Ellen sprang out of bed. "I—I must have gone to sleep!" She snatched the candle from Madame Cavella's hand, sped across the landing to Lita's room with the stout lady puffing at her heels.

The room was in its customary state of wild disorder. Slippers, hats, tubes of paint, brushes, half-finished sketches littered the chairs, the table, the chest of drawers. The bed still bore the imprint of Lita's body; her lacy gown with its straps of cherry-colored ribbon lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. Mary Ellen's eyes darted about the room. They did not find what they sought. Lita had broken a precedent. She had not left a note pinned to the pillow or propped against anything. She had, however, left a little heap of treasures on the bed, her Spanish shawl, an amber necklace, chiffon underthings, a crystal flask of per-

fume. A scrap of paper lay beside them. On it was written in Lita's distinctive scrawl—"For Mary Ellen who is a Very Precious Lamb!" Her hail and farewell. That was all.

Mary Ellen felt the sting of tears in her eyes. She had not realized until that moment how fond she was of Lita. And Lita had gone. She sat down on the edge of the bed and tried desperately hard to think.

"I didn't want to call anyone else," explained Madame Cavella looking sympathetic and a bit excited. "No use to have the whole house up and that Smithers woman croaking about the younger generation. I'm mean enough to cheat her out of a scandal. Did you know, Mary Ellen?"

"Yes—yes, I knew. But I didn't believe it. Somebody told me. The girl Joe was engaged to. I thought she was mistaken. I—I went to sleep." Tears trembled on her lashes; her chin quivered.

"There, don't cry, dear. It wasn't your fault. Do you know where they're going?"

"To Easter Haven in a car. They're going to take the through train from there."

"Well, we can't do anything about it," said Madame Cavella comfortably.

"We must do something about it!" said Mary Ellen sharply. "I can't let her go. Aunt Ella would be so distressed. And I—I promised Lolly."

"How far is it to Easter Haven?"

"I don't know. There's a detour." She recalled the night she had traveled the rutty detour road with Jim. If only she had a car! Jerry! But Jerry was out on the Cape. What should she do?

"It's half-past twelve," said Madame Cavella. "What time does the train leave?"

"Around three. Oh, what shall we do?"

"Go to bed," advised Madame Cavella. "Girls often elope. Let her go."

"I can't," said Mary Ellen stubbornly. "Lita's mother left her in Aunt Ella's care. She'd never get over it." What should she do? A thousand impossible suggestions whirled through her mind. And then, all at once, the suggestion which was not impossible.

"We could go by water. That's the shortest way."

"In a boat?"

"Yes." Mary Ellen fairly flew over to her own room, snatched off the kimono, burrowed into her closet for stout rubber-soled shoes, a heavy sweater.

"But you can't go all the way down to the dock at this hour," protested Madame Cavella following her anxiously. "You can't go all the way down there after one of the Captain's boats."

"They're no use. Only the *Speed Away* has a motor and she's slow. Eric's boat is faster than any of Grandfather's." Mary Ellen was lacing her shoes with flying fingers.

"Eric!" exclaimed Madame Cavella. "I thought he was—I thought he had——"

"He was and he had but I think he came back tonight. I'll row over. It isn't far."

"Suppose he isn't there?"

"Then that's all I can do," said Mary Ellen, quieter now that a definite course of action lay before her.

"You can't go alone!"

"I'm not afraid." Mary Ellen was drawing a sweater over her head.

"I'll go with you," announced Madame Cavella firmly.

"No—no. I'm not afraid. Really, I'm not. You know I've grown up with boats. I rowed alone to the island when I was eight years old."

"I'm going," said the stout lady with unmistakable emphasis. "Unless you think I'd sink the boat."

"No, it's not that. But it's late and chilly and I'm afraid you wouldn't be comfortable."

"Comfortable!" sniffed Madame Cavella. "I've been comfortable too long. It's bad for me. Why, bless your heart, darling, I wouldn't miss it for the world! I haven't chased a pair of eloping geese since the soprano ran off with the bass when we were singing 'La Bohème' in Chicago years and years ago. I'll hurry into some clothes." She moved cautiously toward the door. "You needn't worry. If the boat tips over, I'll probably float for days."

In an incredibly short time they were moving toward the island. Madame Cavella sat in the stern of the rowboat. She had exchanged her dressing gown for a velvet cloak. What she wore beneath it Mary Ellen could not even guess. Something bunchy and pink. A spangled scarf covered her head—but not entirely. One tin curler was plainly exposed. She was in the best of spirits and seemed to be not at all alarmed when the boat rocked threateningly. Mary Ellen was grateful for her cheerful company. She realized that she might have been frightened if she had attempted the journey alone. She tugged valiantly at the oars.

It was very dark. The stars had disappeared. There was no light save the tin lantern in the bow of the boat and the blurred distant lights of the opposite shore. The boat moved slowly toward the island. Mary Ellen felt that it must be a dream, a fantastic sort of nightmare; the darkness, the silence broken only by the creaking of the oar-locks, the swish of the water against the boat, Madame Cavella's voice encouraging her with gay, audacious stories. And more fantastic, more impossible than the dream itself was the thought that in just a few minutes, if her strength did not fail, she would see Eric.

XVIII

A SLENDER dart of light pierced the tangle of trees and vines on the island. Mary Ellen flew toward it blindly, stumbling over roots, dodging branches, slipping, half falling on the treacherous carpet of pine-needles. On and on sped her flying feet toward the blurred patch of light in the Palace window. Her heart beat frantically, her breath came in short painful gasps. She forgot Madame Cavella toiling painfully in the rear, forgot that Lita was running away, remembered only that she must somehow reach Eric. There, at last, were the birch trees, misty white in the darkness, the ragged old pines, the trumpet vine trailing over the doorway of Tarpaper Palace. She did not stop to lift the dolphin knocker. She jerked open the door, whirled into the room like a small but determined cyclone.

Eric was sitting beside the fire. He glanced up as the door flew open, rose, came to meet her. Mary Ellen saw the rusty plumes in his hair, the lean brown angle of his jaw, his fingers folded about the bowl of his pipe. She saw something else vastly more wonderful, the look of amazement and radiant joy that shone in his grave dark eyes. She forgot that she had meant to be cool and reluctant; gave no thought to decent pride. She flew into his arms, felt them tighten around her, felt the scratchy tweed of his coat, the pounding of his heart. She clung to him, sobbing,

laughing, murmuring incoherent words. In a moment both of them were talking at once:

"Mary Ellen. . . . Darling!"

"Oh, Eric! . . . Eric!"

"I love you, Mary Ellen!"

"I've missed you so. . . . Don't leave me again."

"Never. . . . Never again."

"Hold me tight so I'll know you are real."

"Funny! . . . Sweet! . . . Darling Wendy!"

And then there was Madame Cavella standing in the doorway, the lantern sifting little speckles of light in a circle on the floor. She was puffing a little and smiling and sniffling and wiping her eyes on the floating end of her spangled scarf because, of course, in the excitement she had neglected to bring a handkerchief. Mary Ellen came back to earth, told Eric as quickly as possible that Lita was running away. He immediately became brisk and efficient. He seemed to know exactly what to do. Oh, the blessed relief of shifting her burdens to Eric's broader, more capable shoulders; the joy of looking at him, hearing his voice! Like a dream and nicer than a dream because she had only to touch him to know that he was real.

Things began to happen. They happened so rapidly that Mary Ellen felt as though she were watching herself act in a moving picture and someone was turning the crank too fast. First there was the long ride to Easter Haven in Eric's boat. She sat in the bow and watched the misty lights on the opposite shore, the water breaking and curling in a silvery furrow as they

sped out of the harbor, across the broad open stretch of the bay. Madame Cavella refused to be left on the island. She sat hunched up on the narrow seat, her feet propped on a coil of rope, talking about bull-fights, gondolas, bewildering things like that. Eric steered, tinkered with the motor, sent the boat at top speed toward the dim cluster of lights that was Easter Haven. On and on through the darkness, a strange fantastic journey.

Then they were there, tying up, stumbling over a jumble of wharves, hurrying along the shadowy main street of the village to the station. They found no one there save a telegraph operator half asleep in his dimly lighted cage. Eric asked him questions. He told them the through train stopped on signal at three o'clock, that there were no passengers that night as he knew of. He stared very hard at Mary Ellen with her long fair braids falling over the rough green sweater, at Madame Cavella in her velvet cloak and spangled scarf, at Eric tall and anxious, his hair tossed by the wind. Madame Cavella talked to him. Soon he was laughing, bringing her a glass of water, a chair from his dingy den. They waited in the station because it had begun to rain. Mary Ellen sitting beside Eric with her hand clasped tightly in his felt that she would be content to stay there forever. The hands on the round-faced clock moved slowly. It was two o'clock—ten minutes after—quarter after and the eloping couple had not arrived.

The movie reel clicked on and on. Presently a lanky youth with a checked cap tipped rakishly on one side of his head rushed into the office. He was panting,

half out of his wits with excitement and importance. He gave the group in the station only a passing glance and accosted the telegraph operator:

"Here you! Wire Mayport. 'Phone or somethin'. Get the hospital. Accident down the road."

Fear clutched Mary Ellen's heart; her head began to spin.

"Ask him who it is?" she murmured to Eric.

Eric had not waited for the request.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"Accident. Car smashed," the boy answered pleased to be the bearer of exciting news.

"Anybody hurt?"

"Guy smashed up."

"How many people in the car?"

"Dunno. Must 'a' been hittin' a terrible gait. Car looks like a pile of kindlin'. We live near there. Somebody banged on the door and shouted for help. Me and Pop turned out. Gosh! I wouldn't wonder if 'twas in all the papers."

"Will you take us there?" Eric asked. "We've been looking for friends. Perhaps——"

"Sure. Crowd when I left. More the merrier. Come on. I got a flivver outside. Gosh! We ain't had an accident like that since the Lord knows when, though it's the worst curve in the road."

Then they were rattling along the quiet main street, through the village and a bit beyond to a curve at the end of the hill where a group of men were gathered in a knot at the side of the road. Mary Ellen sprang out of the flivver almost before it stopped and wormed her way through the group of men to the shattered

twisted wreck of a car half buried in a ditch beyond a concrete culvert. And there in the circle of light cast by the lamps of a standing car Joe Bandarra was lying on the ground, limp and inert, his caressing dark eyes closed, a horrible sickening gash in his head. Two men were working over him, talking to each other in hushed voices. Mary Ellen felt her knees grow weak. She steadied them with an effort and glanced wildly around. No sign of Lita. She laid her hand on the arm of the nearest spectator.

"Was there anybody else in the car?" she asked.

"Dunno."

"A—a girl?" she murmured.

"Blamed if I know. Ain't seen any. But now I come to think 'twas a girl that banged on my door and yelled for help. Queer how I come to forget that." One hand pulled at a drooping sandy mustache, the other scratched a head sparsely covered with sandy hair.

"Where—where is she?" Mary Ellen managed to gasp.

"Dunno." He deliberately shifted a cud of tobacco from one side of his jaw to the other.

"Have they looked under the car?"

"Sure. Looked myself and all I found was that thing." He jerked a thumb at an object lying at the edge of the circle of light.

She looked and uttered a desolate little moan. It was Lita's long limp doll from Paris, the suave and sophisticated Esmerelda, her silken skirts wet and torn, one arm hanging by a thread, her aristocratic nose mashed flat against her face. Mary Ellen reached

under a strange pair of legs, lifted the doll, held it against her breast. There was Joe and here was Esmerelda but where, oh where, was Lita?

Then she was leaning against Madame Cavella's shoulder and Eric was patting her hand. They talked but the words had no meaning. Madame Cavella had lost her spangled scarf. The halo of tin curling pins was shamefully exposed. She did not seem to mind. She caressed Mary Ellen's shoulder and uttered little soothing sounds. Her voice seemed muffled and very far away. Eric asked questions, left her to talk to the doctor, returned with the news that Joe was still living but very badly hurt. And presently they were riding back to the station in another car; tramping along the platform, wondering what to do. Even Eric seemed bewildered. Mary Ellen felt as though she were moving through a nightmare. She began to fear that she would never wake up. The rain increased. Tiny drops of moisture beaded Madame Cavella's velvet cloak, clung to Eric's lashes. The through train, unchecked by a signal, whizzed by like a long glittering snake and was lost in the distance.

A slim dark form emerged from the shadows at the other end of the platform, limped painfully toward them. Mary Ellen felt her heart beat quickly and then almost stand still. She broke away from Eric, and flew to meet the slim limping figure. A moment later her arms were clasped about Lita's neck; she was sobbing, and asking incoherent questions. But Lita did not cry—not just then. She held her small head proudly. Her eyes were enormous dark circles, her mouth a scarlet line in the white mask of her face.

"Hello," she drawled with only the merest suggestion of a quiver in her low lazy voice. "What is it—old home week?"

"Lita darling!" sobbed Mary Ellen. "I've been so worried."

"What happened?" asked Madame Cavella and "Where have you been?" Eric demanded sternly.

"I'm walking home," Lita answered. "It's rather difficult. I forgot my roller skates and—I think—my ankle—is broken." She swayed against Mary Ellen and fainted quietly on the station platform.

On and on clicked the movie reel. Eric carried Lita into the station and laid her on a bench with her head in Mary Ellen's lap. Madame Cavella rubbed Lita's wrists, examined the injured ankle. Eric brought water. The telegraph operator fanned her with a newspaper. Presently Lita opened her eyes and cried comfortably in Mary Ellen's lap. Her grand lady manner had vanished. She sobbed like a frightened child. Eric talked to Madame Cavella. Mary Ellen caught a word here and there. . . . "Better go back in the boat . . . stay on the island . . . no use raising the house. . . . The fewer people that know about it the better. . . . Not hurt much. . . . Frightened. . . ." She did not attempt to relate the scattered remarks. It made no difference where they went now that she knew Lita was safe.

Then they were in the boat, moving away from Easter Haven. The rain fell faster than ever. Eric found oilskins for Madame Cavella, covered Lita with his coat. The wind blew a gale; the small boat bobbed

ceaselessly up and down. Would the nightmare never end? Lita rested against Mary Ellen's shoulder. She did not talk. Occasionally she shivered and winced with pain. Once she asked in a thin weary voice:

"Was—was Joe killed?"

"No, Lita," Mary Ellen answered and tightened her arm about the shivering, forlorn little figure.

"I couldn't do any more than I did," Lita mumbled and lapsed again into silence.

Eric grimly held the wheel, shook the rain out of his eyes to look out across the water. There, at last, were the harbor lights blooming like misty flowers. There was the spindle that marked the hidden reef. Another unmeasured interval of rain and wind and ceaseless tossing. Lita moaning faintly, stirring in Mary Ellen's arms. Madame Cavella rubbing, patting, soothing, her serene good nature undiminished, her cheerful voice making the darkness a little less terrifying. The island, a dim blur in the distance. Closer, clearer with every sputter of the sturdy little engine. The landing at last. Grandfather's rowboat rocking like an empty cradle. The birch tree where Mary Ellen's orange signal once had flown. The patches of new boards in the crumbling dock. Eric was carrying Lita. Mary Ellen walked ahead with the lantern. Madame Cavella struggled with Lita's bag and the limp remains of the doll from Paris.

Now they were in the long, familiar room. Eric was piling logs on the fire. There was the bronze kettle, the wing chair, the rug with the rust-red schooner. The feeling of unreality melted away; the movie reel clicked more slowly. Mary Ellen removed her wet

garments, tied herself into Eric's bathrobe. It trailed behind her like a train. She was obliged to take many reefs in the sleeves before her hands were free to help Madame Cavella put Lita to bed on the cot. Dear Madame Cavella! She moved briskly about in an elaborate pink chiffon tea gown foaming with creamy lace, the row of curlers encircling her anxious pink face, Eric's flopping felt slippers on her feet. She was calm and efficient, the cheeriest member of the bedraggled crew. She bathed and bandaged Lita's ankle and talked a great deal of nonsense. Lita clinging tightly to Mary Ellen's hand, gallantly endured the pain. She made no protest, remained strangely, pathetically quiet so long as Mary Ellen held her hand and stroked her forehead with gentle fingers.

Then Eric went out to chop more wood and Madame Cavella retired to the kitchen to make hot lemonade for everybody. Mary Ellen knelt beside the cot and patiently stroked Lita's brow. She lay with her eyes closed, small and white and helpless, so different from the Lita who had gayly set forth to kick her slipper over the moon. Mary Ellen looked at the pale little face, tears on her lashes, a swelling flood of tenderness in her heart. How young she looked lying there on the narrow cot! She was only a child, spoiled, restless, snatching at frail impermanent toys. Perhaps it was not Lita's fault. If she had been taught to live more simply, to enjoy quiet, graceful things how much happier she would be. Queer how you could learn things like that only by experience. Mary Ellen sighed; a tear rolled down her cheek, lay like a drop of dew, sparkling crystal clear, on the blanket.

Lita's lashes lifted; her great dark eyes dulled with pain looked up at Mary Ellen.

"Tell me the truth," she murmured. "Was Joe killed?"

Mary Ellen shook her head.

"Is he badly hurt?"

Mary Ellen recalled that limp figure lying at the side of the road; the horrible sickening gash in his head.

"Yes, Lita," she answered. "He's badly hurt, very badly hurt."

"I'm a wicked, wicked girl," said Lita slowly. "It's all my fault."

"No, dear," soothed Mary Ellen. "Not all your fault."

"I thought it would be thrilling to run away," Lita continued in a dull lifeless voice. "I was never in love with him but he fascinated me. He was awfully good looking. We were going on the stage."

"Yes, I know."

"How did you know?"

"Lolly told me."

"Lolly?"

"Joe's girl."

"With the red curls?"

"Yes."

"Did she feel very badly?"

"Yes, Lita. You see she loves Joe."

"And I didn't. But I thought it would be fun to marry him. I've always wanted to go on the stage. Father wouldn't let me. I thought if I were married —— And I knew we'd make it. We—we were pretty good." There was a flash of the old assured

Lita in the statement. Mary Ellen smiled mistily and patted her hand.

"Lita," she asked. "Tell me what happened? Why weren't you in the car with Joe? We found Esmerelda."

"The doll?"

Mary Ellen lifted the lady from Paris, laid her beside Lita on the cot.

She glanced just once at the bedraggled object, shivered, closed her eyes.

"Take her away. I can't bear the sight of her. I might have looked like that."

Mary Ellen hid the doll beneath the cot.

"I was so frightened when I found her."

"Frightened? Why?" Lita's eyes opened again, gazed calmly, sadly at Mary Ellen.

"Because—because I'm very fond of you."

"I don't see why," mused Lita. "I've never done a decent thing in my life. I'm a selfish miserable worm. I don't see why anyone should like me."

"But I do," said Mary Ellen softly. "You're sweet when you forget to pose."

"Pose," said Lita grimly. "I never do anything else. It's necessary with my crowd. You have to be different or you're ignored. This running away was a sort of pose. I thought the crowd would be impressed. They expect me to do things like that."

"Yes, I know."

"You know everything, Mary Ellen. You're—you're sweet. I never could pretend with you. Funny. I've never known a girl like you. You're decent but you're not a prig." She held Mary Ellen's hand against

her cheek for a moment. "I've never liked girls. They're either cats or starched petticoats. But you—you're a Very Precious Lamb."

"Thank you, Lita," said Mary Ellen gently. "That's one of the nicest compliments I've ever had."

Lita smiled a wan little twisted smile.

"I suppose I wouldn't tell you if I didn't feel so wilted and frightened. It's sentimental. My crowd would rather be accused of murder than sentiment. You're not supposed to care about anything except having a good time. But I do care. I never thought much about it until I was riding with Joe over to Easter Haven to-night. That's why I—I changed my mind."

"You changed your mind, Lita?"

"I thought how you'd feel about it and Mother and Father. It came to me all of a sudden what a rotten thing I was doing, making so many people unhappy just for fun. I—I told Joe I wanted to go back."

"What did he say?"

"He laughed first. Then when he realized that I meant it he swore like a pirate. He said he wasn't going to have everybody laughing at him. He has a rotten temper and he'd been drinking some. Oh, he said awful things, Mary Ellen." An expression of pain flickered into her eyes. "I suppose I deserved some of it but no one ever talked to me that way before. I jammed on the brakes at the top of that hill and jumped out. It was then I twisted my ankle. It hurt so it made me feel faint but I ran down the hill as fast as I could go. Joe started the car, to chase me I suppose. He was furiously angry and he'd had some-

thing to drink. He lost control, I guess. The car whizzed past me and crashed into that culvert." She shivered and covered her face with her arm.

"Never mind, dear," soothed Mary Ellen. "Don't bother to talk."

"I want to talk." Lita steadied her trembling lips. "I want to tell you while there's no one here. It was horrible! Never in all my life will I ever forget the sound of that crash. I hurried as fast as I could. Joe was underneath the car. I couldn't see anything but his hand. Just his hand—hanging limp. I knew I couldn't do anything so I ran to the nearest house and banged on the door. A man popped his head out of an upstairs window. I told him there had been an accident. Then I hid behind some bushes until I saw two men run out of the house and down the road. Was that selfish, Mary Ellen? I didn't want anyone to see me. There was nothing more I could do."

"Of course not. You did the best thing, Lita, the only thing you could do."

"I thought I'd go on to New York or maybe wait for a train back to Mayport. I hadn't decided. I was so frightened. And then I finally got to the station and there you were." Her voice thinned into silence; her head moved wearily upon the pillow.

"I couldn't let you go without trying, Lita."

"You're a darling as well as a Precious Lamb. I—I think I'll go to sleep."

Her lashes fluttered against her cheeks. She lifted them after a moment.

"Will everyone have to know?"

"There's no reason why anyone should. Unless Joe

tells, and I don't think he will even—even ——" She recalled in a flash Joe dancing with Lita at the Fakirs' Frolic, and found it impossible to complete the sentence.

"You mean even if he gets well?"

Mary Ellen nodded her head.

"I hope he will. But I never want to see him again. Will Aunt Ella have to know and Grandfather?"

"Aunt Ella will—something about it. Not everything, Lita, if you'd rather not."

"I would. They've been nice to me. I like them. Mrs. Smithers and the rest of the flock—must they know?"

"Of course not. Eric is going over early to tell Aunt Ella we are here with Madame Cavella. We'll go later. Probably no one will miss us."

Lita breathed a long sigh of relief.

"Eric's nice," she murmured, "and Madame Cavella is a good old egg. I don't mind them."

Again her lashes fluttered against her cheeks. She was quiet for so long that Mary Ellen thought she had gone to sleep. Presently, however, Lita stirred and drowsily called her name.

"Yes, dear. . . ."

"You won't—you won't tell Jerry."

"No, Lita."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart."

"He's a big stupid old thing," murmured Lita so softly that the words seemed tiny drifting ghosts of sound. "But he's a lamb . . . sometimes."

Her small round head turned on the pillow; one hand

crept up beneath her cheek. She sighed, stirred gently and then was quiet.

"Sh!" Mary Ellen lifted a cautioning finger as Madame Cavella emerged from the kitchen with a steaming pitcher. "It's all right. I think she has gone to sleep."

* * * * * * * *

Quiet settled over Tarpaper Palace. Lita slept on the narrow cot, her hand beneath her cheek. Madame Cavella, dosed with hot lemonade, slept in the small room at the rear. Mary Ellen sat curled up in the wing chair, her feet tucked under the trailing robe, her hands folded in the bunchy softness of the sleeves. She watched the fire with dreaming eyes, smiled at the row of footwear drying upon the hearth. There were Eric's russet shoes, square tipped and sturdy. Her own small oxfords stood next to them like launches moored beside an outgoing brace of steamers. Madame Cavella's suede slippers with sensible heels for comfort and glittering buckles for pleasure stood next in line. Lita's patent leather pumps, slim and gay, toes pointed out in dancing position completed the row. She thought how queer it was that the four pairs of shoes, utter strangers only two months ago, should now stand so intimately close together, side by side on the hearth. They could never be strangers again. The events of a single evening bound them fast. Queer. . . . Life was surprising, uncertain, mysterious. You never knew what strange adventure might be waiting just around the corner. She smiled drowsily, curled deeper into the warm embrace of the shabby

old chair, gazed past the row of footwear into the heart of the fire.

"What are you thinking?" Eric returned from his last trip to the wood-pile and disposed of his burden.

"About shoes—and life—and things," Mary Ellen answered.

"Aren't you tired? Don't you want to lie down?"

"There aren't enough beds."

"You've forgotten the cot at the top of the stairs. I'll carry you. . . ."

"I don't want to sleep," Mary Ellen decided. "Please—I'd rather talk."

"About shoes and things?"

"About us."

"To-night? I have a story to tell you. It's rather a long one. Wouldn't you rather wait until to-morrow?"

"It is to-morrow, isn't it?" she asked.

"Well, yes —— The rain stopped some time ago. There's a pink flush in the sky. I suppose it is to-morrow."

"Then tell me the story now."

"Sure you aren't too sleepy?"

"I like stories—if they're pleasant."

"This one is rather gloomy—in places." He sat on the arm of her chair, pillowed her head on his shoulder, held her hand warmly in his.

"Does it end nicely?"

"Very nicely," he answered, his cheek against her hair.

"Then tell me the ending first. I won't mind the gloomy parts."

"Funny! Do you read the last chapter first?"

"Sometimes," she confessed. "How does the story end?"

"And they all lived happily ever after, or at least as happily as human beings are permitted to live forever after."

"That's nice," she said with childish seriousness.

"I love you, Mary Ellen."

"That's nicer. But you never told me before tonight."

"I didn't dare," he said gravely.

"Didn't you love me before, Eric?"

"I'll tell you the story, sweet."

He sat on the floor at her feet, rested his head against the chair.

"I can't see you down there, Eric."

"I'd rather you wouldn't—until the story is finished. You see, I want to tell you everything. It may be . . . a bit difficult."

"But I can touch you, can't I? Just once in a while. . . . Like this. . . ."

She smoothed the rumpled dark hair back from his brow.

"About every other minute." He caught her hand, held it a moment against his cheek, kissed the tips of her fingers. "I love you, Mary Ellen."

"That's the end of the story."

"And the only part that matters."

"Start at the beginning."

"Well—once upon a time," he began lightly.

"I'm glad you remembered. That's the proper way to begin." She nestled against the faded chintz cush-

ions, sighed a long, happy sigh. Unhappiness, tragedy, the tangle of other people's affairs seemed unimportant, very far away. The world, for the moment, consisted of Eric and her, firelight, a hearth and a shabby chair. For the moment? "For always," she whispered above the singing of her heart.

"Well, once upon a time," Eric repeated. Then, all at once, he dropped the light, playful tone. "She wasn't my wife, Mary Ellen. That was not true. I hoped she would be but we were never married. I'll tell you that first because it may be important."

"That didn't seem to be important—not even at first."

"I was afraid it might. Well, then, I'll go back to the time—when I was four years old. I think that's far enough. Nothing very much except croup or chicken-pox happens to anybody before he is four years old. My father died then. He was the only son of a proud old family, a family that worshiped ancestors, wealth and silver plate. They expected my father to live according to their standards, to occupy a massive mahogany chair in a massive mahogany office, to pass the collection plate on Sundays in striped trousers and a bat-wing tie, to marry the daughter of a family as old and proud as their own and spend the honeymoon in Europe accumulating culture from the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey. My father did not fulfil their expectations. He studied art and he married my mother.

"You've heard about her, Mary Ellen. I wish you might have known her. She was beautiful; she was brave; she was wise and gay. But all that meant noth-

ing to Grandfather Swann. She was an actress and seemed to have no family connections. He refused to meet her, disowned my father, washed his hands of the whole affair. My father was not seriously concerned. He was happy with my mother and very much in love. They lived in a succession of shabby studios. He painted, did advertising jobs when the pantry was empty and shoe soles worn thin. She hemmed curtains, made biscuits in a tin gas oven, laughed at poverty and discouragement. She had been successful on the stage. She left that behind because she loved my father. Is it any wonder I grew up with the belief that love was a beautiful thing? "

He paused for a moment and poked at the logs in the fireplace. Mary Ellen curled up in the chair was as quiet as a statue, a vivid, eager little statue with rose-flushed cheeks and shining eyes.

" I came along," Eric presently resumed. " They gave me my father's name. I am Eric, the third, if you care to have that engraved on your calling cards? " He smiled up at her, looked again at the fire. " And when I was four years old, my father died. Mother went once to my grandfather's gloomy old house. The stiff-necked butler informed her that no one within the august portals desired to see her then, or at any future time. She returned to the stage, became a favorite; in time, a tradition. She took me with her wherever she went. Those were the only happy years I have known. She was never too rushed, never too tired to amuse me. She read to me, invented games which she enjoyed as much as I did. I think that was the secret of her charm. She never quite grew up. We

spent the summers somewhere beside the sea. We were happy. I thought she was the most wonderful person in the world.

" The winter I was ten, my mother played a long engagement in New York. My grandfather came to see her. He wanted me. I was the last of the Swanns. He thought, I suppose, that with proper training I might be fitted to occupy the mahogany chair and wear the bat-wing tie. He convinced my mother. I was packed off to his great gloomy house. I hated everything about it. I hated my grandfather. They promised my mother that she might come to see me whenever she liked, but her infrequent visits were not pleasant occasions. Aunt Agatha never left the room while she was there. She'd sit in a carved chair beneath a portrait of some bygone ancestor and freeze all the happiness out of the visit. And they talked about my mother. I fought at first but it was like fighting all the long line of ancestors clear back to the one that arrived in the *Mayflower,* if he did. It seems to me that tiny ship must have been dangerously overcrowded.

" Then they sent me away to school. I knew nothing about boys. They seemed a tribe of young savages to me. I hated them. It was there that I learned to fight. I was tall for my age and rather strong. I fought dozens of them on the sly and earned a certain amount of respect. They left me in peace. I lived alone, read a great deal, learned to carve figures from blocks of wood, to sketch a bit. And, I wouldn't confess this to anyone but you, Mary Ellen, I used to cry myself to sleep at night.

"I stood it all until I was eighteen. Then I suddenly knew what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't want to occupy the mahogany chair. I wanted to learn to paint. I told my grandfather. He flew into a rage. I ran away. They found me and brought me back. Next time I made my plans more carefully. I went to my mother. She understood. She always understood. . . . You're like that, Mary Ellen. . . . Darling! Are you still there? Are you asleep? . . . I love you so much! . . . She went to Grandfather. There was a scene, I suppose. She didn't tell me much about it but I went to art school, lived with a friend of hers. Nice old Minnie. She was a little like Madame Cavella. Mother came for Christmas that year, the first happy Christmas since I was a kid. She left for San Francisco the next day. I remember her standing on the station platform . . . the sunlight on her hair. She had marvelous hair, Mary Ellen. Long, like yours, but brighter. Red gold."

"Yes, I know," murmured Mary Ellen. "Grandfather told me. And flecks of gold in her eyes. Eyes like yours, Eric."

"And tiny gay hands. . . . I never saw her again. She died in San Francisco; was buried there. Flu, they said. I was desperately unhappy. She was the only person on earth I loved except Minnie, perhaps, who played with Mother in the old variety halls. I hated my grandfather for treating Mother unkindly. I swore I would never accept a cent of his money. It seemed a sort of tribute to her. I was young, Mary Ellen, and very lonely. . . . I finished at art

school, studied with the man whose studio we visited the other night. . . . Was it only last week, darling? It seems a very long time ago. . . . Mother left me a little money. Enough. I lived in a top-floor studio, worked very hard. I got on well. I was full of ambition and high ideals. I thought I was destined to become famous. Most of us do at that age. My grandfather sent for me to come to see him. I refused to go. He wrote me a letter, told me I might return whenever I made up my mind to give up the idea of being an artist. You see the mahogany chair and the bat-wing collar were still waiting. I tore up his letters. I swore I would never accept a cent of his money. I was working hard and quite content. Then," he hesitated a moment. "Then . . . I met Doris."

Mary Ellen stirred. Her hands lifted; her fingers laced against her heart.

"Shall I go on?" he asked.

"Please, Eric. . . . I want to know . . . everything."

"After to-night we'll forget it. We'll never speak of it again."

"Perhaps. . . ."

"Do you love me?"

"Oh, Eric!"

"Remember. This had nothing to do with you and me. It's out—a part of the past. If I were not sure of that I should not have returned to the island . . . to you. Will you believe me?"

"Yes, Eric," said Mary Ellen softly. "Please . . . please go on."

" . . . I met Doris. She was beautiful. I fell

completely, thoroughly, ridiculously in love with her. She was cool and exquisite, a figure carved from ivory. Her father was wealthy. That made no difference to me. I haunted her home for two years. There were always men around. I would gladly have fought any one of them to the death. I was a young Lochinvar come out of the West, I was Sir Galahad, I was a romantic young idiot. She said she loved me. We became engaged, not with the unqualified approval of her family. Obstacles meant nothing to me. I thought that love was the most beautiful thing in the world. I thought Doris would be content to live with me anywhere. I thought love made women brave and sweet —like my mother. I built castles in the air. I dreamed dreams. I was young, romantic and very much in love. To me she was a goddess. I placed her on a pedestal; I worshiped her. I could not think of her as a human being. I wove all sorts of illusions about her. I loved, though I was too young to realize it then, an idea and not a woman. I worked for her. Everything I painted was done for love of her. I did that portrait. My teacher was pleased with it, asked permission to exhibit it with some work of his own. I felt as though I could conquer the world for Doris with a brush and a tube of paint.

"We were to have been married in September. . . . Five years ago. I planned this shack on the island. I drew sketches of it. A tower for a princess . . . a golden princess . . . Doris. I thought how my mother would have loved it. I thought Doris would love it too. I had the lawyers who managed my mother's affairs send the sketches to builders here. It

was to have been finished by September. I did not tell Doris. I planned to bring her here for our honeymoon. I was to paint. Doris was to sit beside me on the rocks, swim with me, sail, count the stars through our tower window.

"We quarreled about the money. I had told her about Grandfather, the whole miserable story. I thought she understood. But as the time for the wedding approached, she talked about it very often, asked me if I didn't think it a bit foolish to give up the money. I laughed at the idea, painted glowing pictures of happiness in a top-floor studio where she would hem curtains and bake biscuits. She grew quiet, restless, unhappy. One day she asked me to make my peace with Grandfather. I tried to explain, to make her understand. I would have done anything on earth for her except that. It would mean the mahogany chair and the bat-wing tie, all the bunk of family tradition. If I voluntarily put my neck in the noose, I would never escape. And yet I might even have done that, if I had not felt that I would have been, somehow, failing my mother. I was still young and very romantic. I explained. I thought she understood. There was no scene. Doris never weeps or loses her temper. She was as cool, as remote as an ivory figure. She left me quietly and asked me not to call that evening. The next morning I read in the paper that she had eloped with a man enormously wealthy, older than she.

"The world crashed around my head. For a week I think I was actually mad. I walked all night through the streets, back and forth in front of her house. I

would have killed myself if I had had the courage. All my life was centered about her. I had no desire to live. I smashed my brushes, locked the door of my studio, determined never to paint again. It sounds foolish, but it is quite true. I lost my faith in ambition, in love, in everything. I wandered about in Europe and here at home, restless, desperately lonely. I worked in the mine, I chopped trees in the woods of Maine so that I would be tired enough to sleep at night. God only knows why I kept decent. Self-respect, I suppose. There was the income from my mother's money. Enough. I spent very little. Money meant nothing to me. It could not buy back for me the courage, the belief in ambition that I had lost. Last spring I remembered the island. I knew that the shack had not been entirely completed but I thought it might be livable. And I've always loved the sea. I came. . . .

"Then you popped your lovely head in my window. You were sweet and brave and gay. I was happy with you, interested in things. I began to sketch—I told you about that. I wanted you to admire me, to think I was good for something. I'd wake up in the morning glad to be alive, looking forward to queer little adventures with you. I was afraid to believe that it would be permanent. You showed me her picture that day on the beach. All the old unhappiness returned. I fought it off. I thought I had conquered it, put it forever out of my life. It returned in a measure. . . . To see that portrait. . . . You knew. You were unhappy. You ran away from me.

"The moment of unhappiness passed. I knew then

how much I cared about you. I tried to find you. You had gone with Jerry. There was nothing left of you except the cluster of bitter-sweet you had worn in your twisted braids. I picked it up, put it in my pocket. . . . I carried it with me all last week. . . . I'm still romantic, Mary Ellen. It's great to feel that way. . . . I wanted to find you, to tell you that I loved you, but more even than that I wanted to be sure. I couldn't take chances with your happiness. I cared too much about you. I wanted to be sure that I would never make you unhappy for that reason again. I went to New York. I went out on Long Island. That's why I went away without seeing you. . . . I saw Doris. She invited me to tea on her landscaped terrace. I sat across the table from her. She is still beautiful, a figure carved from ivory. Something to be looked at and admired. She is not, was never, real. When I looked at her all I could think of was that freckle on your left eyelid, the green candles in your eyes. I was sure. I came back as quickly as I could. There were things to do in New York. And then to-night you whirled through the doorway and flew into my arms."

"I had no decent pride," Mary Ellen murmured.

"That's because you are wise enough and brave enough to be yourself. Do you love me, Mary Ellen?"

She slipped out of the chair and into the circle of his arms.

"Oh, Eric! So much! I—I nearly died."

"I'm sorry, sweet. But I couldn't take chances. I had to be sure."

"And you are sure, Eric?"

"Utterly and eternally sure."

"Then that's settled." She breathed a long, long sigh.

"There's not a great deal of money. But I'll work for you."

"As though I cared about the money! "

"Would you live in a top-floor studio with me, sweet? "

"Anywhere. . . ."

"But your house with casement windows, your dogs, your garden? "

"I'd rather have . . . just you."

"Darling! . . . We'll manage them sometime. . . . Close your eyes."

"And open my mouth? "

"Not necessarily. It's this I want." He lifted her hand, rolled back the bunchy sleeve, slipped a ring on the slim third finger. "Now you can look."

She opened her eyes, saw the glittering stone caught in a setting as frail as frost work.

"Is it mine? " she gasped.

"I think so. Your name is engraved inside. Like it? "

"Oh, Eric! " Her chin quivered, tears trembled on her lashes.

"Crying? "

"It's because I'm happy."

"Funny! " His arms folded around her. "I love you, Mary Ellen. I can't seem to get along without you. Will you let me wear your rose-colored spectacles? "

"Yes, Eric."

"And keep the green candles shining in your eyes?"

"Always and forever."

"That's a long time."

"Not—not nearly long enough."

"Darling. . . . Wendy. . . . Little sweet thing! . . ."

The candles on the shelf above the fireplace melted into pools of wax; the light in the green-shaded lamp flickered, sputtered, died away. The logs burned into a mass of flaky gray ashes shot with tiny flames of rose and gold and blue. Through the windows crept the flush of dawn. Mary Ellen, folded in Eric's arms, her cheek against his, her hand curled in the nest of his lean brown fingers, lingered in the delectable borderland between sleep and waking. Ecstatic fancies flocked through her head; the little birds that lived in her heart sang rapturously. And on her shining hair rested an invisible crown; not the childish gold-paper crown she had sailed to the island to find, but a crown of happiness set with imperishable gems: hope, courage, dreams, the radiant center jewel of love. A crown for a princess, a gallant, gay little sovereign, the Princess of Tarpaper Palace.

THE END

Anne of Windy Poplars

by

L. M. Montgomery

Author of
"Anne of Green Gables,"
"Anne of Avonlea," etc.

Readers who recall with delight the earlier "Anne" books, will enjoy this new story about this popular and well-loved heroine—a tale rich in humorous characters, human episodes and romantic atmosphere.

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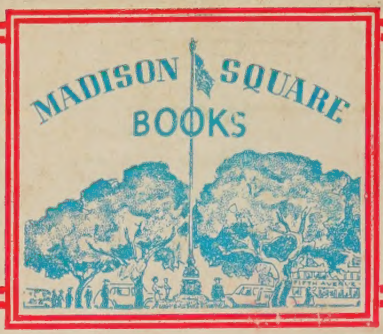

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